Goldilocks

AND THE

INVISIBLE WEDDING GIFT

GENE TIERNEY
and the
Invisible Wedding Gift

An original story featuring
GENE TIERNEY
famous motion picture star as the heroine

By
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Authorized Edition

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Gene Tierney Arrived at Lake Morra

GENE TIERNEY and the Invisible Wedding Gift

CHAPTER ONE

AN ODD ASSORTMENT

The taxi careened into the downward grade of a wide, curving driveway. Tortured dry leaves scattered, clawing for an instant at the windows of the car. In the back seat, the lone occupant recoiled from the crisp brown shower and gave a smothered gasp.

But the driver heard. He looked around, grinning.

"Surprised you, I bet, Miss Tierney—getting you out here so fast. This old buggy has what it takes." The palm of his right hand bestowed a benediction upon the steering wheel.

Gene Tierney made no reply other than a quick nod and what she hoped was an appreciative smile. She was tired of smiling, tired of saying, "Oh, is that right? How nice! How interesting!"

The ride from the station had been a wearisome half hour. The taximan, for all his shock of snow-white hair, had a vitality of speech that was like an unchecked current. It flowed on and on, increasing

rather than diminishing as they neared their destination. It had been, too, by an indirect route. The self-appointed committee of one had led her on a generous sight-seeing tour. This, he explained, would not cost her a penny, not one red cent. It was not every day that he had a chance to introduce a famous screen star to Lake Morra!

"Please don't bother!" Gene had protested. "Just take me to 3157 Wooddale."

She had told him that right at the start, when she had first entered the cab. It had not been necessary to mention the name, Ainslee. The man knew that. He had been vastly pleased to have her as a fare, and still more gratified to know where she was going. The Ainslee family was one of the best, Gene was informed, the very best. And if she knew the people on Wooddale, she must certainly know Mrs. Harriet Van Allen in the Old House. Almost with reverence the driver repeated, "The Old House."

Gene managed to get in the word that she did not know Mrs. Harriet Van Allen. She had neither the desire nor the opportunity to add that she did not know any of the Van Allens or the Ainslees, except Barbara. Three months ago, Barbara had not been an Ainslee. She had been Barbara Hoyt, a dear friend of Gene's. It was Barbara, Gene had come to see.

The taximan had told her for a second time, "Sure, we'll get out to Wooddale. But I bet you don't often

see a place like the Old House. It's just around the lake from the Ainslee place. We'll drive around that way."

And so, sighing, Gene had leaned back, submitting to the climax of the tour. The shoe factory, the flour mills, the potteries were in the past. In a short while she would be at Barbara's.

Gene wondered about Barbara. It was several years since they had seen each other, but it seemed a much shorter time. They had written often enough to keep in touch. The longest span of silence had been these past four months. Barbara had written in May telling her great news—that she was to be married in June. She wanted Gene to come for the wedding.

That had been impossible. Gene had been genuinely sorry. She wrote: "I'll make it the last week in September for sure."

As it turned out, it was not September, but October. At Lake Morra, where winter meant deep snow and cold, October should be the poet's inspiration for "bright blue weather."

As she looked out at the spacious lawns, and the houses set far back amid massive half-bare trees, Gene thought that the prospect was neither bright nor blue. But then, she reminded herself, this was evening. The early dark was setting in. She thought, *I suppose I should have wired Barbara.* She had not, because there might have been some last-minute

slip-up. Her own disappointment would have been bad enough, but to dash Barbara's happy expectations a second time would have been too much.

Barbara was different and, in her own way, special. It was a rather pathetic way, but courageous, too. Barbara was an orphan. She had only an elderly aunt. There had been a time when Barbara had dreamed of seeing her name in lights, but she was wise enough to realize her dream would not come true. So she had gone back to her school and then into teaching little tots. At Lake Morra, Barbara had met Jimmy Ainslee, and now she was Mrs. Jimmy Ainslee.

Gene smiled as she thought about her. Barbara must be happy. From what she could see of the surrounding estates, her friend certainly must be prosperous. Barbara had intimated as much in a letter, telling of the lovely home she would have. *Yes,* Gene thought, *she's happy. She has to be!*

The taxi, she observed, had slowed. The driver was saying, "Right up there, Miss Tierney, on top that hill. See it?" His voice took on the hush of reverence. "That is the Old House."

Gene's gaze followed obediently, and she suffered a shock. That it was called the *old* house should have prepared her, but the great pile of stone with the cupola poking up into the reddening sky was like something out of a too-dim past.

"Nothing like it for miles around here," the driver

intoned. "And they say it's a regular museum inside, just crammed with treasures."

Gene managed to say again, "How interesting," and then she asked if it were much farther to the Ainslee home.

"Right around the lake, Miss Tierney." With regret, the taximan drove on. He motioned with a jerk of his head. "There's a bridge goes across from the Old House to right near the Ainslee place, but it ain't fit now for traffic. Oh, you can walk across, you understand, and a mighty pretty view of the lake you get, too." The shaggy white head shook. "I don't know when they'll get around to putting in a new bridge there."

Gene kept her silence, but her eyes were busy. The driver shot back various bits of information concerning the lake itself, its depth above and below the waterfall, the outdoor theater only a few minutes away, but Gene was interested only in getting to Barbara's. Her answering murmurs grew fainter. She looked for a sign that would read Wooddale and the thought grew: *I wish I had called Barbara from the station! Maybe this is an inconvenient time for her. Maybe—maybe she won't be home!*

The taximan, she realized, was talking about the Ainslee family. He was saying something about the "Old Doc" and then he was cutting in to the curving driveway, grinning back at her and saying how speedy their trip out here had been!

He need not know that she was smiling with relief. Finally she had arrived, and the Ainslee house, thanks be, was no ancient pile of stones. It was of brick, spacious and spreading into a wide, low porch. Even in the fading light the place had a friendly, new look. Many of the larger trees had shed most of their leaves, but there seemed to be a hundred evergreen shrubs dotting the sloping grounds.

The car was brought almost within scraping distance of a zigzagging stone pathway. In an instant the driver was out, opening the door. He said, "I'll take your bag, Miss Tierney," and did so. "Not very big, is it? You should've planned to stay longer."

Gene's sensation of gratitude persisted. Her smile was genuine enough. "Maybe I will stay—longer," she said, and stepped out upon the first of the flat stones. After a hasty, eager glance toward the doorway, she opened her purse. "There was no meter in the cab," she smiled. "If you'll tell me?"

Almost furiously, the man shook his head. "Don't mention it, Miss Tierney. I told you I wouldn't take a red cent. I wouldn't think of it!"

At that moment a light came to life over the square-paned door. The door opened and Gene saw Barbara standing there. Gene said in a rush to the man, "Thank you so much for the lovely ride. You certainly have a right to be proud of Lake Morra." She had taken the bag from his hands. "No, please," she said, in a tone that would not allow protest. "I'll

be able to manage nicely now." She moved onward, over the flat stones. "Thank you," she shot back once again.

Barbara lost her look of perplexed wonder. Joyously, almost wildly, she cried out, *"Gene!"*

The door was flung wide as Gene dashed up the stone steps. Her bag dropped and both her arms went about Barbara.

"Oh, Gene!" Barbara cried. She was very small. Her nose almost buried itself in Gene's hair as she returned the warm embrace. "Oh, come in! Hurry!" she said in the same husky-soft voice Gene remembered. "I want to look at you!"

They went into a small hallway, and Barbara closed the door. She noted the size of Gene's bag and frowned. "Oh, Gene! You'll stay, won't you? For days and days!" She drew a quick breath. "Oh, there's so much to say, I don't know where to begin. But first, let me just look at you! Really look!"

Gene was lovely in a brown-and-cream suit. The coat was plaid, with shirtwaist sleeves, and was smartly belted. The skirt was brown and slim. Her hat, a merry, mad thing of soft cream felt, graced her pretty hair without hiding it. Nor did it hide her eyes, and as Barbara inspected her, Gene was studying the face of her friend.

Barbara seemed much the same. She was a little thinner, but her brown eyes were wide and round and eager under high, arched brows. Her mop of

dark hair was a little longer and Gene liked that. She wore a yellow cotton dress and a pert apron, and Gene liked that, too.

Now Barbara ran the fingers of one small hand up against the side of her face and into her hair, in a gesture that Gene well remembered.

"I just can't believe it!" she breathed. And then, louder, "I just can't, I tell you. It seems too good to be true! And you're ten times prettier, Gene! You're just—beautiful!"

"Oh, Barby!" Gene hugged her again. "You haven't changed a bit—except that you look a lot better." She drew back, laughing. "It does seem kind of like a dream. I can't believe, myself, that I'm really here." Her eyes went past the girl, toward the open door of the living-room. She could see the huge piano and the lighted lamp beside it.

Barbara followed her gaze. She said quickly, "Here we stand, and you must be so tired." Her hand led Gene forward. "Let's pull up a chair."

Gene said, "I've been sitting for quite some time. I'd have been here a half hour ago, only I went on a sight-seeing tour first."

Barbara repeated, puzzled, "Sight-seeing tour?"

"Um-hum. And my guide refused to let me pay him. For absolutely nothing, he showed me the principal industries, and even pointed out the Van Allen home. He took it for granted that I should know somebody called Mrs. Harriet Van Allen."

"Oh!" Barbara said. "That's Father Ainslee's sister."

Gene, busy looking about the room, did not notice that Barbara spoke in a different tone. Her eyes went to a long row of windows that completely filled one wall. The drapes, of heavy reddish material, were all pulled tightly shut. The few pieces of furniture were of surprisingly large size. There was a couch and four deeply upholstered chairs. At one side of the stone fireplace was a broad leather-topped bench.

Gene looked upward to the heavily framed mirror over the fireplace. Barbara's head would not reach that far, and Gene felt a sense of mild surprise, but she said laughingly, "It was quite a relief when my taximan kept on going around the lake. I was afraid you lived in a place like that Old House."

The only lamp which had been lighted was the one near the piano. Barbara moved toward the couch, and her fingers found the button of a high, bronze floor lamp. She and Gene were seated in two of the deep chairs when Barbara said, "This isn't my—I mean our house, Gene."

"It isn't?" Gene spoke quickly, and her thoughts raced. Had she said anything that might offend Barbara? It did not seem so. Rather shakily, she laughed. "Well," she said, "it's a place to live."

Barbara did not smile. Soberly, she said, "We're grateful, of course. Father and Mother Ainslee have

been awfully nice." She sounded like a well-behaved child saying a lesson. Her hands were folded in her lap. She looked toward the piano. "But, oh! I'll be glad when our own house is finished!" she added in a burst of feeling, looking straight into Gene's eyes.

Gene said, somewhat weakly, "Oh, this is *their* house. I didn't know, Barbara." Some of the misgiving she had felt for not calling her friend ahead of time returned. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come!"

Barbara was her own self again, warm and eager. "Of course, you should have come! I'm so glad you did, Gene! There's plenty of room, really." Her hands went out in a little flourish. "In fact, I have the whole place to myself right now."

"Oh." Gene felt reassured. But then, puzzled: "Where is everybody?"

Barbara chuckled. "Oh, here and there. Jimmy —he's the most important, of course—is up north for a couple of days on some business for the bank. And Father and Mother Ainslee are at the turkey farm."

Gene felt herself wishing that she had paid more attention to her taximan's chatter. He had said something about the "Old Doc," and Gene wondered who that might be. She echoed, with the right amount of interest, "A turkey farm? Sounds good."

Barbara looked sober. "It was necessary. Father Ainslee had to stop his practice—he was a doctor,

you know—and get out into the open. He had a chance to buy this turkey farm, and it seemed like a good idea." She corrected herself: "It was a good idea. He's looking ever so much better than when I first met him a year ago."

That explained the "Old Doc." Gene found herself nodding and listening as Barbara went on. "They have a new bungalow on the farm and they spend quite a bit of time there. I expected to be all alone tonight."

Gene's eyes went toward the tightly pulled drapes. Why, she could not tell, but she had a feeling that they had been drawn as a shield, that perhaps Barbara was afraid to be alone.

There was a kind of heavy hush that held the room, a feeling of waiting. Barbara was the same, yet not the same. Something had happened since that brief and joyous greeting a few moments before.

Gene shook off the sensation, telling herself that this was a silly notion. The thing boiled down to the fact that this was not Barbara's house. It was scaled much too large for her, at least this particular room certainly was, and no doubt the rest of the house would be the same.

Barbara seemed to read some of her thought. She said, "Oh, you'd love *our* house, Gene! It's right on the lake, above the falls. We had such a lot of fun planning it!" A sigh broke in. "But it's not anywhere nearly finished. Our man said it would be,

by Christmas!" She laughed ruefully. "I certainly hope so. The family can't get any use out of the amusement room. That's where most of our presents are. I'll show you after awhile."

"Oh, I'd love to see them, Barbara."

Barbara smiled. "We have some lovely gifts. One of the nicest of all was that pair of candlesticks—but I guess I wrote you."

"Um-hum," Gene said. "I'm glad you liked them. I hope you didn't get several duplicates."

"Nothing like them at all, but you'll see." Barbara was all animation. She rose swiftly, went to the table and picked up a leather folder. "These are our wedding pictures. The photographer followed the whole thing. I guess he took about fifty pictures in all."

Gene settled herself for enjoyment. "This is some compensation," she said. "I hope they do you justice."

Barbara was flushed and happy. "They flatter me, really. But Jimmy looks just as he is."

Gene had seen a snapshot of Jimmy. He was thin and very dark, with a face that seemed to have come alive from a Greek coin. Gene had written that to Barbara, and Barbara had replied, "But the Greeks had no word to describe anything half as grand as he is!"

So now, seeing Barbara so radiant, Gene thought, *It doesn't matter whose house she lives in. This is*

only for the present anyway.

Barbara put the folder aside abruptly. "Oh, Gene! I'll bet you haven't had dinner!"

Gene laughed. "Is that all? You startled me for a minute."

"Here I sit, chattering on, wanting to show you a lot of pictures, and you're starving!"

"Who said I was starving!"

Barbara rose. "Come on," she said. "We'll eat first, and talk afterward." Her arm went about Gene's waist. "Or, we'll talk while we eat," she corrected.

"You know, it's funny, but it's true. When you haven't seen somebody you like in a long time, you —well, you don't say half what you *want* to say, do you?" She paused for a moment. "You don't have to hurry away, do you, Gene?"

Gene did have to hurry. She had planned to stay only one night.

"Well—," she began.

"Please stay for a week," Barbara begged. She heard Gene's gasp, and added, "Or a couple of days, anyway." There was that feeling again, that nameless urgency. It was as though Barbara were pleading for the nearness and help of a friend.

Gene said, "I'll see, Barby."

They did not go back through the hall into which Gene had come, but through a square dining-room, and then into the kitchen. It was not a large room,

but at one end was a breakfast nook. There was a curved seat in one corner and a table where two might be comfortably seated. The woodwork was gleaming and reddish. Only on the wall over the nook was there a spot of color. This was a flower panel in bright reds and blues.

It was a convenient workroom, with a number of electric appliances. Gene looked about at the shining stove, the cupboards and the sink. Her gaze rested there, for there was something unusual about it.

Barbara said, "I was just going to throw out those flowers." They were in a heap on the drainboard, but that was not what had caught Gene's eye. Then she knew. The sink was so high! When Barbara went over and gathered up the wilting blossoms, she seemed even smaller than before.

"Mrs. Ainslee must be a tall woman, Barby," Gene said. Barbara nodded. "She is, and Father Ainslee is tall, too." The flowers went into a container under the sink. "And, for that matter, so is Jimmy." She grinned over her shoulder. "I'm the only shorty in the family."

"Quality counts," Gene observed. "Now, what can I do to help?"

"Just sit down and let me look at you." Barbara soaped her hands. "You know, Gene, it's a blessing you came. I probably wouldn't have bothered getting a decent meal just for myself."

"Well, don't fuss for me, Barby, please. Just a cup of something."

Barbara opened the well-stocked refrigerator. "We'll have a real dinner," she said. And judging from the way her hands flew, bringing out various dishes and packages, this was no idle statement.

Gene said presently, "Barby, would you have been here all alone—all night—if I hadn't come?"

"Oh!" One hand went to her hair and Barbara's eyes flew wide. "I almost forgot! Thanks a million for reminding me!" She moved swiftly toward the hallway. "I've got to call Bessie. She was going to come. I'll tell her not to."

Barbara made the call and returned in a few minutes. "I'm glad that's settled," she said. "Bessie's the cleaning lady. Between the two of us, we try to keep things the way Mother Ainslee wants." Water flowed into the coffee-maker. Barbara added dubiously, "Sometimes that isn't too easy."

Gene did not pursue the thought. She found herself being annoyed with both Father and Mother Ainslee, sight unseen. She did not like the formality with which Barbara spoke of them, nor the sink that was too high for Barbara, nor the tightly drawn curtains in the living-room. Nor did she like it that Barbara was all alone, even though Bessie, the cleaning lady, had been expected. Barbara was so little and gentle, she should be protected, Gene mused.

There was that thought again, absolutely without

foundation, Gene scolded herself. Why should she presume, in so short a time, that Barbara needed to be protected? The girl seemed enough at her ease at the moment, making swift headway at the stove. Gene told herself, *I'm hungry, that's what's giving me these silly notions!*

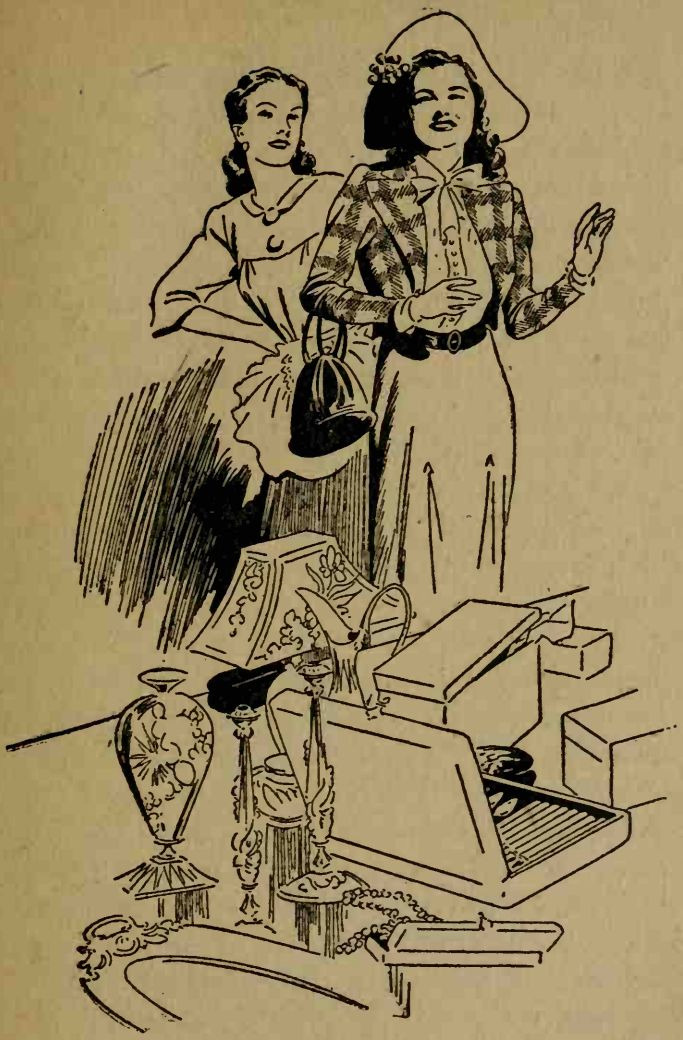
In no time at all, it seemed, they were eating heartily, and Gene was warm in her praise of the meal. Barbara beamed under the approval, and as they slipped out of the seat in the nook, she grinned. "Wait till you see what I'll cook tomorrow—and the next day—and the next!"

"Now, now!" Gene warned. "Don't tempt me! Let's do the dishes."

"They'll keep." Barbara took her hand. "Now we'll go down and look at the presents."

The way led down a rather steep flight of stairs. There was a landing and Barbara showed where a narrow archway led to the laundry. They kept on going down, and then another archway opened into the amusement room. Gene gathered that it was under the living-room, but it seemed much larger. There was a fireplace at one end, a tremendous thing of natural stones. Various birds and the heads of moose and deer hung upon the walls.

Filled almost to overflowing, were the billiard and card tables. Gene gasped with pleasure. "Barby! It looks like a gift shop!" She corrected herself: "No, a department store!"



"Barby! It Looks Like a Gift Shop."

"You see what I mean." Barbara spread her hands. "You can hardly wiggle around down here. Look over in that corner."

Gene looked. Against the farther wall another table had been placed, and this was piled high with linens and boxes of all sizes.

Barbara explained that Mother Ainslee had thought the best thing was to leave all the gifts right here. It would have been silly to put them into storage for such a short while. "And," Barbara added a little wistfully, "we can come down here and look at things, anyway."

"I should say so!" Gene said enthusiastically, and went toward the first large table. Under the white overhead light, silver gleamed and glassware twinkled.

Barbara pointed to the center of the lovely clutter. "There, you see? Everybody asks who sent us the candlesticks, and do I ever hold up my head and tell 'em!"

Gene laughed and reached for a quaint pitcher. Barbara told of the donor, the mother of one of her former pupils. They were both talking so animatedly, that neither was aware that footsteps were coming down the steps, until a throaty, deep voice said, "Well, here you are!"

Barbara gave a startled cry and Gene stared in amazement. Three people were entering the amusement room. A most unusual-looking old lady was

in the lead. She wore a long, stiffly flowing dress of a purple so dark it seemed almost black. A black fur cape was about her wide shoulders. An immense hat of purple silk rested on straight raven hair. Both hands grasped a beaded bag. Gene noticed that it gave off little glints of light, but her gaze remained on the old lady's face. Her eyes were like beads, big, deeply set, flashing beads—and cold.

The old lady said, "I haven't much time to spare," and the beads of eyes flashed from one girl to the other. She said, apparently to both of them, "Where is Stuart? At that farm of his again?"

Barbara moistened her lips. "Yes, he is. Mother Ainslee's with him, too, and Jimmy's away on business."

The old lady now seemed satisfied that Barbara was the new addition to the family. Her eyes darted swiftly over the spread of gifts. "Huhm!" she grunted. "Quite an odd assortment, I'd say." The look became more searching, as though she were trying to place some definite gift. Barbara helped her. She nodded toward a beaten-silver tray.

"We just loved your gift, Aunt—er—Mrs. Van Allen."

"That's good. You may call me Aunt if you care to. I believe I am, now." Only very slightly, her tone softened. "Your wedding was pretty. Sorry I couldn't come for the reception, but I had a cold. And I've been busy, ever since, making up my

mind."

The two other persons who had come with her were standing farther back, against the wall, and with common accord they made a small motion of wearied impatience. Slight as it was, however, the old lady was quick to note it. She turned her eyes toward the pair. "This is Mr. and Mrs. Dodds."

Gene's first thought was, *More tall people to dwarf Barby!* But Mr. and Mrs. Dodds were unusual for more than their height. The woman had golden hair worn in a bright, straight bang across her forehead, and a smooth pageboy roll fell to her shoulders. She had narrow, slanting, grayish eyes, a long thin nose, and wide lips. Her green suit was dashing, with wide sleeves flaring into a bright plaid cuff. Atop her golden head was a green fez-like cap. Her hands in white gloves clasped a wide, red bag.

The man was older, perhaps thirty-five, and his hair was thinning. The right eyebrow, which went up higher than the left, gave him a quizzical, disbelieving look. His thin mouth, too, seemed pulled in at one corner. He was dressed neatly in a brown business suit, but he seemed ill at ease. Both he and the woman murmured something in response to the half-introduction, and Gene experienced an uncomfortable moment.

It was Mrs. Dodds who said, "Pardon me, but are you Gene Tierney? I've been staring at you, and wondering." Her voice was well modulated, too

much so, with a kind of forced lilt.

Barbara said warmly, "Yes, this is Gene—Miss Tierney. She just came a little while ago."

Murmurs of approval and appreciation came from the woman's mouth, but it was evident that the name Gene Tierney meant nothing to Mrs. Van Allen. Her eyes had been darting about the amusement room, and she moved a little closer to examine some of the pieces on the billiard table. "Huhm," she said presently, and gave an explosive sigh. "Well, you'll have to give my message to Stuart."

This was addressed to Barbara, who nodded. "Certainly." And she waited. They all waited a quiet moment when the dropping of a pin might have been heard.

Mrs. Van Allen's lips were pursed as she appeared to be searching for the words she wanted. Noiselessly, a little in the background, Mrs. Dodds opened her bag and took out a compact. It was an almost unconscious gesture, the act of a woman who habitually runs a flat powder puff across her face in moments of stress. Gene was watching her out of the corner of her eye, and so she was not aware of the sudden transformation that came over the old lady.

Mrs. Van Allen began, "I've come to a decision. I am going to have the book done by Mr. and Mrs. Dodds. They will take some photographs, and draw some pictures. It will be about my antiques."

This seemed a rather strange message to be de-

livered to her own brother, but Gene did not think about that at the moment. She watched the dabs with the powder puff. Mrs. Dodds finished swiftly and her long, pointed fingers which curved at the brilliant tips were soundlessly replacing the compact when silence again fell upon the room. Mrs. Van Allen, for all her haste, was given to lengthy periods of thought.

Mrs. Dodds looked up expectantly, and for an instant caught Gene's eye. The large mouth was beginning to move in a slow smile, when the old lady cried out suddenly, "Listen! Do you hear that?"

Heads turned quickly toward her.

Barbara said, "Hear—what?"

"That—that clock! Listen!"

"Clock?" Barbara looked toward Gene and back to the old lady.

Mrs. Van Allen was deathly pale. Her black eyes stared into space, and then darted madly from one table to another. "Listen!" she commanded in a voice that quivered with terror. "Be quiet, all of you! Do you hear?"

Quiet fell, deep and thick. No one seemed to breathe, and out of the depth of that silence, Mrs. Van Allen whispered hoarsely, "Do you hear it? The ticking of a clock?"

Gene, the first to speak, said, "Yes." The others had heard it, too. They said so while they watched the old lady with varying looks of surprise and con-

cern.

She turned swiftly toward Barbara. "Tell me," she said in the same throaty whisper, "is there a clock in this room? Did you get a clock for a present?"

"Why—yes," Barbara said, and backed up a little. She turned toward the billiard table and pointed. "There's an electric clock for our kitchen." Her lips moved slowly and her eyes were on the old lady in wonder.

"It's not connected." Mrs. Van Allen grabbed up the neatly rolled cord. "It couldn't have been this clock." She stood with her back to the table, and her hand shook as she pointed to the group. "But you all heard it, didn't you? You heard a clock ticking?"

Mr. and Mrs. Dodds exchanged a quick look. The man frowned, and the golden-haired woman shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly.

The old lady caught the movement. "You think something's wrong with me, don't you?" she said almost fiercely. "Well, it is! If you only knew!" She stopped abruptly, fought for composure and, when she had taken a deep breath, repeated, "I want you all to listen again, I want to make sure."

Gene gave a sudden start, for something cold had touched her wrist. She realized in a moment that it was Barbara's hand, reaching for and finding hers. Their fingers drew together and held as again the room was bathed in the pool of silence. And so, this

time, it remained. There was no repetition of the small ticking sound, which had before, like a mischievous pebble, disrupted the calm of the pool's surface.

Mrs. Van Allen drew a deep, shuddering breath. "It's—gone. But that doesn't matter." Heavily she moved her head so that her eyes went over the length and breadth of the room. "It doesn't matter," she repeated dully. "You all heard it. The ticking of a clock—when there was no clock in the room!"

Gene felt Barbara's fingers tighten in her grasp and the girl came even closer. They did not speak, nor turn toward each other, but like the man and the woman, they stood watching the old lady, their concern giving way to a feeling of alarm.

Mrs. Van Allen's finger pointed sharply and she cried with sudden violence, "Laugh if you want to! If you only knew—!" No one was anywhere near the point of laughter, so Mrs. Van Allen's accusation was unjust.

"Knew — what, Mrs. Van Allen?" The words seemed torn from Barbara's lips.

The old lady whirled to face her. Her finger shook before Barbara's wide and terrified brown eyes. "You're in on this, too, my dear. You're an Ainslee now. It can strike you as well as any of us. And it will strike, you can be sure of that!"

Barbara clung to Gene as she cried out, "Oh, what do you mean?"

"What do I mean!" The old lady laughed high and shrill. "I mean the ticking of a clock — when no clock is in the room. It's *the sign*, the same as it has been for over two hundred years. The *warning*. It never fails, do you hear? Never!"

Gene's quick strong hands held Barbara from falling as the girl went suddenly limp in her arms.

CHAPTER TWO

AN OMINOUS CLOUD

Gene sat on the edge of the couch holding Barbara's hand as she watched the girl's eyelids flutter, then open wide.

Barbara cried, "Gene!" and sat bolt upright.

"Take it easy," Gene said, smiling, and eased her gently back upon the silk pillow. "Relax, honey."

"Oh — Gene." Barbara leaned back, but did not release her hold on Gene's fingers. As her eyes closed again, she murmured, "You won't go, will you?"

"I won't go," Gene reassured her.

Slowly, Gene turned from the quiet face and looked at the others. She nodded toward Bertram Dodds. His wife was named Zella. They had made themselves better known while they had helped carry Barbara up to the living-room.

The two were standing with their backs to the closed drapes. Bertram Dodds nodded in return, saying that he was sure Barbara would be all right now.

Zella Dodds said, "I guess there's nothing more we can do?"

She turned to the piano bench where old Mrs. Van Allen sat stiffly, her arms crossed over her beaded

bag and staring ahead into space.

Zella Dodds said, more pointedly, "I believe you wanted to get back as soon as possible, Mrs. Van Allen?"

"What?" The old lady came alert. "Oh, yes. We have to get back." With an effort, she stood up. She looked toward the windows, seeing beyond them. "There are some matters I wanted to talk over with Emma about the guest house." Her voice lowered. It was almost as though she were talking to herself. "Didn't expect you until tomorrow," she murmured. "Something's wrong with that hot-water faucet."

Zella Dodds said, "I'm sure we'll be quite comfortable, Mrs. Van Allen."

The black eyes seemed less clouded. "You think so, eh?" Grimly the old lady snorted. "I thought you'd be packing up and leaving this very night."

The Doddses exchanged a quick look. Bertram Dodds said, "But why should we? Unless — " he paused — "you no longer wish us to work on the book."

The lines about the old lady's mouth became deep creases. Her jaw seemed almost square. "I want to have that book published more than anything I know," she said. "I want every piece I have, large and small, written up — and pictures to go with it."

Zella Dodds laughed lightly. "Well, we're the ones who can do it for you, I'm sure. From what we've

seen in one brief glance at that first parlor, I assure you, Mrs. Van Allen, it will be a pleasure."

The dark brows came together. "You're sure of that?"

"Why, certainly. That's why we came, isn't it?"

Mrs. Van Allen glanced toward the still figure on the couch. She said slowly, "But — maybe things have changed."

"Nothing has changed for us," Bertram Dodds assured her. "This—ah—curse you mention—if it should strike—"

"It *will* strike," the old lady cut in.

The man gave quiet assent. "Even so" — he lifted his shoulders slightly, and extended his hands outward—"it will not include us, I am sure. We are outsiders, strangers."

"That's right." The old lady seemed to take heart from that fact. "Yes. You are outsiders. You can work on the book and not worry." She came toward them. "But we shall have to work faster—as fast as we can."

Zella Dodds smiled. "We'll do our best, Mrs. Van Allen."

"Yes, I know you will; I know what you can do." She grew taller as she stood before them, drawing more deeply from the comfort to be found in this work so dear to her heart. More of a dominating figure, she came with rustling skirts to Gene's side.

"You're Barbara's friend," she stated, "and you'll

be here for the night, won't you?"

"Of course."

The old lady bit her lower lip. "I wonder if you'd give my message to Stuart?"

Gene thought a moment. Stuart, she remembered, was the older Mr. Ainslee.

"I'd be glad to, if he comes in. I don't believe Barbara was expecting them back tonight."

The large hat bobbed emphatically. "They'll come back. I'll phone them. But I don't want to—" she stopped, coughed—"say anything of what happened here, not over the phone."

Gene nodded quietly. "I see," she said.

Barbara opened her eyes and sat up. For an instant she looked startled, but in the next a smile hovered about her mouth. "I'm so glad you're here, Gene!"

"So am I," Gene assured her.

The old lady coughed again. Although Barbara was now fully aware of what was going on about her, Mrs. Van Allen continued to address Gene. "Tell him," she said thoughtfully, "that I'll be busy for a while, that Mr. and Mrs. Dodds are working on a book about the antiques." A bright gleam, almost of mischief, came suddenly into her eyes. "You might say," she added, "that this is another of my foolish notions. That's what Stuart would be pleased to call it, I'm sure."

Quietly stroking Barbara's hand, Gene maintained

her composure. "I'll tell him, Mrs. Van Allen," she said.

The old lady looked toward the two who had come to help her. No light shone in the beady black eyes now. They were cold with the remembrance of fear. "I hope we get it done—in time," she said, almost in a whisper. She moved toward the door, and the Doddses followed with a farewell nod to the two girls. Zella Dodds's lips formed the travesty of a smile, because there was, in her slanting eyes, something that told of unvarnished pity for Barbara.

Mrs. Van Allen paused once again in her exit, and the two with her stepped a little to one side, awaiting her pleasure.

"And if you please," the old lady said, "tell Stuart just exactly what—what happened in the amusement room, that there was the sound of a —"

Gene felt Barbara's fingers stiffen. She cut in hastily: "I'll tell him, you may be sure."

"Thank you." But still the old lady hesitated. Her eyes went to Barbara. "I hope you'll feel better soon."

Barbara said huskily, "Oh, I will." She cleared her throat. "And thank you, Mrs. Van Allen."

"For what?" the old lady said grimly. The fur cape was flung back from one shoulder as though she had just discovered that it was too warm. "We're all in on this," she muttered, and to the pair who waited: "Well, let's get back."

They went out. Gene watched them until they had disappeared from sight. She listened until the front door closed. Then she looked into Barbara's eyes.

Barbara made an attempt to smile. "Well—?"

Gene thought, *Well, what?* And she wondered what in the world she should say now to Barbara. It had to be the right thing. *Suppose all this had happened to a group of strangers, and Barby and I were simply onlookers? Just ourselves.* The answer came swiftly. They would think it all a bunch of nonsense—a lot of silly superstition.

However, Barbara and she were not facing something that had to do with a group of strangers. Mrs. Van Allen was a member of Barbara's family now. And she had spoken with deep-rooted horror, with absolute fear.

Despite herself, Gene gave a slight shudder. *But this,* she thought, *this sort of thing will never do.* Barbara had experienced enough fright for one evening. Gene was a little astonished at her own mildly amused yet rueful voice when she said, "I guess you have an invisible wedding present, Barby."

"An invisible—?" Barbara repeated, a frown cutting her lovely forehead. Then her eyes grew wide. "You mean the clock."

Gene nodded. "There must have been one somewhere."

Barbara took what seemed a long time to swing

about so that her feet were both on the floor, sedate little black shoes close against one another. Her hands were folded tightly over the little apron which was no longer crisp and fresh. Slowly she met Gene's eyes.

"There isn't a clock anywhere near the amusement room," she said in a quiet, measured tone. "I know it, Gene. I know every inch of this house."

"Well—" Gene searched about for another explanation, but Barbara went on: "She told the truth, Gene. I know she did. I believe her absolutely."

Gene took refuge in a question. "Why do you believe her, Barby? She's an old lady; she admitted herself that she has 'foolish notions,' or what might seem to others to be that."

"This was nothing like that," Barbara said, quietly stubborn. "And you'll find out, Gene. Father Ainslee will admit that—that the sound of a clock ticking—"

"Oh, Barby!"

"You must wait and see."

"All right. Meanwhile, how would it be if you tried to say—well, 'Pop' instead of Father Ainslee?"

Barbara looked mildly horrified. "Oh, I couldn't!" When Gene continued to look at her searchingly, Barbara seemed to melt. "You don't understand, Gene. You don't know how—how different it is here."

Gene was beginning to understand, but she want-

"I Believe Her Absolutely, Gene."

ed to know more fully what had caused the change that had come over her friend. Barbara was little and gentle, but Gene had never known her to faint before. And there was no mistaking the aura of hushed apprehension that clung to the girl. Gene knew now that she had sensed this before the unhappy incident in the amusement room. Something was out of key, horribly out of key.

She said gently, "What do you mean, Barby?"

"Oh,"—Barbara's head bent for a moment—"it's hard to explain. It's just—everything." The brown eyes looked directly into Gene's. "It began a long time ago, Gene—well, what seems like a long time. I—I didn't want to live here—ever."

"I understand that."

"And then the wedding. I didn't want a big one—just a quiet, simple one. After all, I haven't any family."

Gene found her hand and held it.

Barbara went on: "But Mother Ainslee, and Father, too, insisted. They went into a lot of lengthy correspondence and located Uncle Edward. He's not really my uncle, but he used to be my dad's business partner. He and Dad were like brothers."

Barbara's face looked so pale that Gene thought it wise to bring the recital of her disappointment to a close. She put in gently, "I'm sure you won't be sorry in the long run, Barby. Your Uncle Edward, I'll bet, had the time of his life giving the bride

away."

Barbara smiled for a moment. "Oh, he did, and—it *was* nice. It isn't that, Gene. But the wedding was all—well, all on the groom's side, if you know what I mean. I was just kind of—pushed around like a checker."

Gene laughed. "Barby, you're sweet."

"No, I'm not," Barbara contradicted. "I kept thinking how lovely my own mother would have been, and how swell my dad was." Barbara began to cry.

"Now, honey—"

"Oh, Gene!" With an effort, Barbara choked back her sobs. "And then our house wasn't finished, and we had to come here. Honestly, Gene, I've done my best to be of help around here. I've tried so hard to do everything the way Mother Ainslee wants it done." She shook her head slowly. "But it's no use."

"I'm sure you're a help, Barby," Gene said. "You just don't realize—"

"Oh, yes, I do realize! You don't know Mother Ainslee. I think she'd have been the same with any girl who'd married Jimmy. Oh, so sweet, so terribly, terribly, sweet—and stifling!"

Gene frowned. "I don't get it, Barby."

Barbara drew a long breath. "No, of course you don't. It's something nobody'd get, unless he were in my shoes. But I'll try to give you an example.

When you came in, I had one light in the living-room, didn't I?"

"Why, yes," Gene agreed.

"All right. I had just taken the vase of flowers off the piano. The flowers were wilted. I dumped them on the drainboard. Now, if that had been Mother Ainslee who came in, she'd have said, 'Oh, you have already taken out the flowers, Barbara, my dear. I wondered why the light was on near the piano. I didn't think you'd be playing at this time'." Barbara's voice had taken on the kindly, condescending tone one might use toward a child who was not too bright. "Do you understand?" she asked bluntly. "Do you get what I'm trying to say, Gene? Father Ainslee doesn't get it—and neither does Jimmy. He keeps telling me how Mother Ainslee loves me and how lucky we are to be able to stay here until our house is ready."

"I—I get it," Gene said. "You're always on the defensive."

"That's exactly it!" Barbara's eyes shone. "Oh, Gene, you're such a—such a comfort!"

"I mean to be," Gene said staunchly, and then added, "How about Father Ainslee?" She let the formal name slip out easily.

Barbara said in a rush, "He doesn't get any of that undercurrent. He's having troubles of his own —his health, you know. I think I told you he's to give up his practice."

"Yes, you told me."

Barbara nodded toward the right. "His office is in that room. I should say, it *was*. He hardly ever uses the room any more."

Gene observed the closed door. "You said he has a turkey farm now."

"That's right. He and Mother Ainslee spend a lot of time there."

"That must be a good thing—in a way."

"Y-Yes, I suppose so." The pretty mouth tightened. "But I honestly think she tells me to expect her at one time when she's sure it will be hours later, or earlier, so she can find something I've done wrong and then show me—oh, ever so beautifully—how I've made my youthful mistake!"

"Ummm," Gene said. "Now, about those troubles of Father Ainslee's. Is he worried only about his health?"

"I don't know," Barbara said slowly. "But he's worried, that's sure. He's so sort of—well—tense, as though he's waiting for something to happen." Abruptly, Barbara broke off. "Oh!" she cried and leaped to her feet. One hand rubbed against the side of her head, and she whirled to face Gene.

Gene stood up too. "What is it, Barby?"

"It must be that," Barbara said. "Don't you see, Gene? *The clock*. That's what he's waiting to hear —the ticking of the clock!"

Gene felt as though she had been drenched in

ice-cold water. Wordlessly, she looked into Barbara's staring eyes.

Barbara seemed far away in that moment, caught up on a wave of terror. Her voice came, muted, "It can strike any of the Ainslees, Gene. It can strike Jimmy!" Her hand went to her mouth. "Oh, if anything happened to Jimmy!"

Gene had heard enough. She took Barbara by the shoulders and shook her, not hard, but the girl came to the present speedily.

"Stop being so foolish!" Gene said. "Nothing's going to happen to your Jimmy."

"He—he has to be gone so much of the time."

"So what?" Gene demanded. "I think you're lucky."

"L-Lucky?"

"Of course. You have your hands full enough coping with the parents. Having the only son underfoot would complicate things all the more."

"B-But, if that's true—if anything should happen —"

Barbara had said *if* that were true, Gene noted, and took heart. She said staunchly, "Barby, you just have to keep your head, honey, and above all, don't lose your sense of humor. This isn't for keeps, you know. It's only temporary. Why, before you know it your house will be finished and you'll be settling things the way you want them and arguing with Jimmy about where the extra mirror goes."

Barbara said nothing for a moment. It seemed as though she were that other Barbara again, the girl whom Gene had known and loved so well. "Oh, Gene," she said, "you'll stay a long time, won't you? You make everything seem so easy and right."

"Hmmm," Gene said. "Everything *is* easy and right."

At that moment the front door opened; voices were heard, not loud, but urgently calling Barbara's name.

Barbara seemed to stiffen. Her eyes went around the room, taking in the two lighted lamps. Gene caught the look and it went straight to her heart. She knew that the Ainslees had arrived and Barbara was taking a quick inventory to make certain that she had everything as Mother Ainslee would wish.

"Barbara! Barbara, dear!" That was Mother Ainslee calling, but it was a higher-pitched voice than Gene had expected. A large woman, not fat, but big-boned, came quickly into the room. Her hat was off, showing a head a trifle too small for the rest of her. Snow-white hair, closely waved, made it appear even smaller. Her face had a young look, either the result of expert care, or the ability to dismiss worrying thoughts. She was rather pretty except that her gray eyes were set a trifle too close together and her upper lip was too full.

Gene thought swiftly, *If Barbara hadn't told me anything about her, if I'd just met her casually, I*

wouldn't even notice her.

Gene would however, have noticed the way she walked, and the way she gestured with her large hands. Mrs. Ainslee tossed off her coat and came lopingly toward Barbara. She was an awkward-looking woman, in a green sweater and brown skirt.

"Now, Elsie—" This was Stuart Ainslee, close behind her. He was not ordinary-looking. He was very tall and square-shouldered, his movements easy and quick. Taking his wife's arm, he gently brought her to Barbara's side. For one puzzled moment he paused; then he spoke. "Harriet said there was a friend of yours with you, Barbara. She looks very much like—"

Barbara put in, "This is Gene Tierney, Father Ainslee."

The man smiled. "I thought so. Well, this is a pleasant surprise." His brows lifted and he added flatly, "Or is it? I understand you've had a—little experience here this evening."

While Barbara said that was true, that there had been a "little experience" in the amusement room, Gene was studying Stuart Ainslee. She guessed that he was much younger than his purple-rustling sister, Harriet Van Allen, even though there were patches of white hair over his temples. He was darkly handsome, in a more rough-hewn way than his son, Jimmy. If he were very much worried about the news his sister had related, he certainly didn't show it.

They made a group near the fireplace. Elsie Ainslee made appropriate and flattering remarks to Gene. "But," she added, "how unfortunate you had to be so distressed."

Gene demurred, "I haven't been distressed, Mrs. Ainslee. But I'm afraid the whole thing upset Barbara."

"Yes, of course. Poor little Barbara!"

Stuart Ainslee said, "She had good reason to be upset."

Gene had seen the color leap into Barbara's cheeks as Elsie Ainslee had cooed, "Poor little Barbara." She could see her friend's little fists clench. Barbara turned to Stuart Ainslee. She said, "Is that—true? Has there been that—sign in the family for two hundred years?"

Stuart Ainslee did not answer at once. He looked around and found what he wanted, a pipe on the mantel over the fireplace. As he drew a pouch of tobacco from his pocket, Barbara said, "Please tell me, Father Ainslee. Tell me the truth."

Elsie murmured, "Sit down, dear, and try to be calm. You sit, too, won't you, Gene? You must be dreadfully tired."

Gene answered that she was not particularly tired, but she sank into one of the deep chairs. Barbara stood beside her. It seemed as though either she had not heard what the woman had said, or she chose to ignore her. Her eyes remained on Stuart Ainslee's

face, waiting for his answer.

He, too, remained standing, his back to the fireplace. He lighted his pipe and drew on it deeply. Gene knew that Barbara was right about one thing. The man *was* worried. It was not that he appeared nervous. His movements were slow, unhurried, but Gene could feel his tension. It was like a living, breathing thing. She knew as surely as that the reddish drapes were pulled too tightly, closing in this little world, that Stuart Ainslee was holding back some secret, something about which he did not want to speak.

Gene thought, *It's because Barbara told me he was worried. Perhaps I'm imagining all this. It just doesn't make sense!* But she knew that she was not imagining things. Whether or not it made sense, it was true nevertheless. Even before Stuart Ainslee spoke, Gene guessed what he would say.

Once again, Barbara repeated, "I've got to know the truth."

The pipe seemed to displease Stuart Ainslee. He placed it on an ashtray. "You mean," he said slowly, "the ticking of the clock—when there is no clock in sight."

"Yes." Barbara was impatient. "That was what she—what Aunt Harriet said."

Gene was puzzled. She asked suddenly, "Did Mrs. Van Allen telephone you, Mr. Ainslee?"

It seemed he did not hear her. Then his eyes

cleared and he answered, "Why, yes."

Elsie Ainslee said gently, "We had not planned to come in this evening, but dear Harriet seemed so disturbed. I told Stuart when I called him to the telephone that something had upset Harriet frightfully."

"I wondered," Gene said slowly. "She asked me if I would give you the message about the clock, and something else." They were both looking at her questioningly. Gene went on in a rush: "It was this way —Barby was feeling faint, and so she just happened to ask me, that's all." These were not the words Gene wanted and she felt irritated with herself. Now Elsie Ainslee would purr on about "Poor Barbara." But Gene did not intend that she should. Hastily she went on, "What I mean is, Mrs. Van Allen said she did not want to mention what happened over the phone. But she must have changed her mind and told you just the same. Didn't she?"

Stuart Ainslee had been frowning, but now his dark brows eased. "Oh, is that it? Well, yes, Harriet did say, in a guarded way, something about the clock. She probably did—change her mind."

"Oh, she was upset, Stuart," Elsie put in. "I told you she was upset."

"Ummm," Stuart said. And then to Gene: "She had another message?"

"Yes." Gene nodded. "She said to tell you she would be busy for some time. She's going to have a book done about her antiques. A Mr. and Mrs.

Dodds are going to work on it. They were here with her."

Stuart Ainslee looked over toward his wife. "My sister is telling us again please not to disturb her."

"Dear Harriet," Elsie murmured. "She has the quaint notion that she must always be busy about something. Every six months or so, she tells us, so we won't go near her." The white head shook with a gentle pity. "The poor dear is so much older than Stuart, you know."

Stuart Ainslee was looking quietly at his wife. His lips were pursed but he said nothing until he turned to Gene. "What you were probably wondering about, Miss Tierney, is my opinion of my sister's mental condition—do I think the old girl is in her right mind?"

Gene gasped. Put bluntly like that, it seemed in very bad taste. After all, she was an outsider here, a guest. It was bad enough that she must be present at such an unpleasant time without appearing to be a probing busybody. She said hastily, "Oh, Mr. Ainslee, I didn't mean to—"

"It's all right." One slender, tapering hand rose gently. "I understand. And I'd like to ask you a question. You"—his eyes moved—"and Barbara. Did you both hear the sound of a clock ticking?"

Almost together, they said, "Yes."

Stuart Ainslee asked, "And there was no clock in the room?"

Gene shook her head. Barbara said, "No."

"Well," he paused for a moment, "that has happened before a number of times. I heard the same thing before my father—"

Elsie stood up. "Now, Stuart, there's really no need to distress the girls and to make yourself uneasy. You know, we have the Enrights to think about."

His look silenced her. "I think Barbara is entitled to her answer, Elsie," he said firmly, and faced the wide brown eyes. "It's true, Barbara."

Barbara moistened her lips. "Does—does it always work out—that way?"

"It has so far."

She hesitated a moment. "Can you tell how—soon—something is going to happen?"

"No. It may be a week, or it may be several months."

Elsie was standing behind one of the chairs. Her fingers lifted a lace doily and arranged it more perfectly. "I really don't think you should be alarmed, Barbara. I've known about this for years and I must say I have never put any stock in it."

Gene was watching Stuart Ainslee. His expression was hard to read. He seemed struggling between exasperation and unwilling pleasure. It might be that he was irritated with Elsie's complacency but grateful none the less. Gene thought, *In a way, she must have been a help all these years. But I'd like*

to shake her—hard!

Stuart Ainslee said abruptly, "About my sister Harriet. She's doing a book, you say?"

Gene held her tongue and looked at Barbara. Message or no message, she decided she had talked enough and would let Barbara speak for herself, or, rather, for her aunt. Barbara said, "A Mr. and Mrs. Dodds are working on it, Father Ainslee. They'll write it and illustrate it."

Stuart Ainslee sighed. "It should be quite a book, but Harriet would accomplish a lot more, it seems to me, if she turned the place over for a museum. It's so long since I've been in there—"

"Goodness' sake, yes!" This was from Elsie Ainslee. There was a slight bulge in the rug, and one brown oxford pressed it flat. "I was only in that house once, and then all I saw was the first floor." She turned to Gene. "I think it was her husband, Howard Van Allen, who gave her that idea about locking and bolting the house. He had all those treasures in his family for years. Stuart says Harriet used to be quite a jolly person, but—" she sighed, smiling, "ever since my time—"

Stuart cut in: "Harriet's all right if you let her alone."

Elsie smiled at him. "Oh, we do," she said. Her head moved toward the hallway in a quick, listening gesture. She said, "I thought I heard footsteps, but, no. They aren't here yet." She glanced at her wrist

watch. "It's only five to eight."

"We're expecting guests—the Enrights. A couple of old cronies," Stuart explained.

Barbara looked surprised. "I thought they were coming Thursday?"

Elsie smiled. "Louise called just after Harriet. She asked me if we could make it this evening instead." Her smile was next for Gene. "We usually play cards every other Tuesday."

Gene said politely, "Oh, that's nice." Out of the corner of her eye she watched Stuart's hand reach again for his pipe. It seemed the fingers were not quite steady. Gene guessed that an evening with the Enrights was far from the man's liking. But Elsie thought otherwise.

She said, mildly persuasive, "You'd better spruce up a bit, Stuart."

"I did. Showered and changed at the farm." He glanced quickly at his tweed suit. "Won't this do? The Enrights aren't fussy."

"Oh, very well, dear," Elsie said soothingly. "Just as you wish."

Gene felt Barbara's hand creep lightly over her shoulder and saw that Barbara was sitting on the arm of the chair. Gene looked into the brown eyes above her own, but Barbara was staring ahead, into space. What was in Barbara's mind? Gene had no way of knowing, but she was positive that an evening here would be precious time wasted for both of

them. Putting on her pleasantest smile, Gene said to Elsie, "I had a most interesting ride out to your home, Mrs. Ainslee. I heard about the bridge across the lake, but I didn't get a chance to see it. Would you mind if Barbara and I went on a little tour of investigation?"

"Mind?" The woman seemed relieved. "Why, certainly not; I think it would be very nice." She was beaming on the two of them. "The bridge is only about a block from here. It crosses the lake just at the foot of dear Harriet's property."

Barbara was smiling too. "Let's go right away," she suggested. "I'll get a coat."

Gene said, "Wait, Barby. I think I left my topcoat in the kitchen."

"Yes, you did," Elsie purred. "Such a pretty plaid, too. I noticed it, because the light was on in the kitchen and I wondered—" she let her voice trail off and Gene put a period to the speech with another of her best smiles. If Elsie could have read her thought, however, her placid poise might have been shaken.

The girls hurried off. As soon as they were free of the house, breathing in the cool, smoke-laden air, Gene said, "Now, *this* is much better. Dear Elsie stifles me!"

"Awful, isn't she?" Barbara lifted her little nose. "Everybody's burning leaves now. I like the smell, don't you?"

"I love it."

"And the stars! Aren't they beautiful, Gene?" Barbara's arm twined into Gene's, the way they used to walk so often, cozily, happily. Barbara laughed. "I should think of something poetic, but I still always seem to be reminded of Alice. Remember?"

Gene quoted, " 'Twinkle, twinkle, little bat. How I wonder where you're at'."

They walked to the end of the stretch of flat stones. Gene asked, "Now, where?"

Barbara paused a moment. "We could walk on down to Wooddale, but I know a short cut." They took it, a crisscross pathway between gnarled tree trunks. It was slow going, for the light was dim, but Gene felt happy and free, and she knew that Barbara did, too. This was, she thought again, so much better than the Ainslee house.

Presently they came to a wider path and Gene saw the row of lights that marked the span of the bridge. She saw the lights reflected upon the dark, quiet water, and then, holding Barbara's hand, she began to cross the wooden boards. It was easy to believe that traffic was no longer permitted. Under their feet the boards creaked and protested.

Barbara said suddenly, "Let's go over to the right side, Gene. It's higher there."

They crossed to where the boards were raised about half a foot. "There's no fear of any cars coming," Barbara said happily, "but you can see better

up here."

For a time they walked along in companionable silence. Barbara was nearest to the wooden rail and her hand tapped it lightly now and then. They found, presently, that they were both thinking about the same person. Gene said, "This leads to Mrs. Van Allen's property, hm?"

Barbara laughed. "I was just going to show you something. I will soon point with civic pride to the Van Allen outdoor theater."

Gene said with real interest, "You don't say!" Her eyes probed ahead. "Where?"

Barbara's right hand motioned. "There. See that big, dark curve?"

Gene discerned it, and answered affirmatively.

"Well, that's it. That's the back of it—what we call the stage. It's really more of an archway. The lake is the real background."

"Umm," Gene said. "I wish we could see it better."

"Oh, there are some lights. See them there, along the steps? Those are stone steps, and awfully high and steep. That's where the audience used to sit." Barbara sighed. "Those stones are pretty crumbled now."

"Not used any more?" Gene asked.

"Not for shows. Some swings have been put up near the lake and people go there for picnics." Barbara's eyes scanned the shore ahead. "I thought may-

"See That Big, Dark Curve?"

be there might be a wiener roast in progress, but it seems quiet tonight."

It was very quiet. An elderly couple came toward them as they reached the end of the bridge, but they were the only people the girls passed. Barbara said, "I brought my kiddies here a couple of times. We really had fun."

"I can imagine," Gene said. But it took a stretch of the imagination. The trees rose gauntly on either side and made a black mass. Ahead of them was the pale grayish outline of the stone steps.

Barbara took her hand. "We could walk over to the stage," she suggested, and Gene said, "Let's do that."

As they moved through the rustling, dry leaves, Gene asked, "Is this Mrs. Van Allen's property, Barby?"

"Um-hum. Her husband built the theater and gave it to the town. At one time everybody was very much interested, I understand. They put on some really worth-while things. But that was a long while ago." Barbara sighed. "It seems too bad. I've often thought—" The words died on her lips.

Both the girls came to a dead standstill, their heads lifted. Gene said, "What was that? I thought I heard someone calling."

"I did too, Gene. Listen."

They had heard a voice, high up on the stone steps. The call was repeated and now they could

hear the words. "Emma! Emma, where are you?"

Barbara was gripping Gene's arm. "Gene! That's Mrs. Van Allen! Aunt Harriet!"

Gene peered upward. What had seemed to be a dark shadow moved closer to a glaring light on a thin, high post. There could be no mistaking the long dress, the big hat. Gene said, "What in the world is she doing up there?"

"She's calling for Emma," Barbara said. "I think that's her housekeeper. I—I can't imagine—"

Nor could Gene, but she was filled with a sudden sense of alarm. "Those steps, Barby!" she said frantically. "They're terribly steep! Suppose she should slip!"

"I know. Oh, Gene, we've got to get up there—and fast!"

But they had only begun the steep, difficult ascent when the voice called again, "Emma! Answer me! Emma!" The voice broke off sharply into a sudden cry, and then all was quiet. A jagged piece of stone came rattling down, bounding over the steps and into the surrounding thicket of tree trunks. It struck with a dull thud. Gene heard Barbara moan as they moved onward. "We've got to hurry, Gene! Something's happened to her!" she cried.

CHAPTER THREE

LOCKED AND BOLTED

Harriet Van Allen lay with her head away from the topmost stone, her face turned sidewise and the big hat wildly askew so only a portion of her cheek showed. One hand was outflung, the other clasped her beaded bag. The old lady seemed not to be breathing. As Gene knelt beside the sprawled figure, she heard Barbara gasp, "It's happened! The way she said! Oh, we're too late!"

"Hush, Barby. Look!" Gene said. She pointed to one black leather shoe, caught in a cleft in the stone. "See that? Help me get her shoe off."

"Oh, what's the use? Can't you see, Gene?"

Gene's hand was over the woman's heart. She said, "It's all right, Barby. Come on. We've got to get her out of here."

"Then, she's—she's not—?"

"She just fainted." As Barbara continued to stand and stare helplessly, Gene added, "It can happen to anyone, my pet."

That told. Barbara drew in her breath sharply. "Are you being nice?"

"I'm being businesslike. Come on, now. You hold her foot while I unlace this shoe."

Barbara knelt at Gene's side and carefully held the twisted foot, while Gene's fingers worked with the laces which were tied with a double knot. Barbara was not looking at her; she was looking at Harriet Van Allen's face. She said suddenly, "Gene! She's coming to!"

Scarcely had Barbara spoken, when the old lady gave a start. "Emma!" she said hoarsely. "Emma! What happened?"

Before either of the girls could answer, she was sitting upright. If they had not been so concerned, they might have laughed. The old lady presented a ludicrous picture. Her hat was down over one eye, and the hand holding the beaded bag was shaking in an almost threatening manner.

"Please, Aunt Harriet," Barbara said kindly, "don't be worried. It's all right."

"It's all wrong!" the old lady rasped. "Where is Emma? What are you doing here?"

Gene said, "We were just going to—"

"Leave my shoe alone! What under the sun are you trying to do?"

Barbara said, "Oh, Aunt Harriet, doesn't it hurt?"

The old lady lifted her free hand and set her hat at a better angle. "Doesn't what hurt?" she said, and, with a grunt, freed her shoe. "I must've caught it and fallen," she said crossly.

Barbara met Gene's eye. A swift smile of relief passed between them, but the old lady remained

grim. She was peering about from under the glare of the light, trying to pierce the darkness. "Where could Emma have gone?" she muttered. Then, to Barbara: "Did you see her?"

"No. I'm sure we didn't. We just walked over the bridge." Barbara's eyes moved down toward the wooden span over the still water.

"Foolishness!" the old lady snapped. "What sense have you, running around at this time of night?"

"Why, Aunt Harriet!" Barbara seemed at a loss. "It's early, and—" She did not ask, "What are you doing up here?" And the old lady did not offer an explanation.

She said suddenly, "If you'll take my hand, I'll get up now."

Both the girls hastened to her assistance. Gently they put their arms about her. At first Harriet Van Allen was almost a dead weight, but with a groan of rigid determination, she helped to bring herself to a standing position. Gene, watching her face, saw the thin lips clamped together. She said, "It does hurt, Mrs. Van Allen. You'd better sit down for awhile." As she spoke, she glanced about and found a wooden bench some six feet away.

"I'm—all right," the old lady protested, but the words were wrung from her lips and the girls felt again the pressure of her weight.

Barbara said gently, "We'll sit down for a few minutes." Without any further argument, Harriet

Van Allen permitted them to assist her to the bench. As she eased herself down, some of her spirit returned. "All right, all right," she muttered. "You can let go of me now." She took a deep breath and her eyes again searched the darkness. "Where could she have gone?" This last was almost a whisper.

"You mean your housekeeper, Aunt Harriet?"

The old lady glared at Barbara. "Of course. Emma. She's never done a thing like this. Never."

Gene said tentatively, "What did she do, Mrs. Van Allen?"

"Why, ran off. Disappeared."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm sure." The retort snapped and flared like a small rocket. After the sudden spurt of flame there was a vague trailing off as the fire went out of old Harriet Van Allen. Her shoulders hunched together. "And tonight, of all nights," she added in a tone of misery. Her lips moved only slightly and she said again, so they could scarcely hear, "Tonight, of all nights."

Down below them ran the steps, big gray humps of stone, with the open-air theater yawning at the bottom. It looked suddenly like a vast mouth, open and waiting. The lake beyond it had a sinister gleam in the lights from the bridge. The night seemed suddenly to take on a thousand vengeful, stealthy whispers as a wind fingered in among the dried leaves and Gene thought, *How could we have had*

fun coming over here? Her eyes remained glued to the bridge for what seemed a long moment. There she and Barbara had strolled happily. But that had been only a short interlude. There could be no real effacing what had happened in the Ainslee home. To open the door, to walk out into the smoky cool air, had not opened a gate to freedom. It had only ushered them nearer to this nameless threat that waited relentlessly, ready to strike with new, fresh terror.

Something of this had come to Harriet Van Allen. Gene did not have to be told that. She felt herself dreading the time when she *would* be told, not so much for her sake, but for Barbara's. This was, after all, no secret menace to herself. But what had happened already and what might happen in the time to come—if it struck at Barbara—! Gene's thought broke. She looked at Barbara sitting small and strained, staring into Harriet Van Allen's face. It was Barbara who said, after what seemed a long time, "Aunt Harriet, won't you tell us—what happened?"

Harriet Van Allen looked at her without flinching. "I'll tell you," she said, in a dull, hypnotic drone. "We came back from Stuart's in their car."

"The Doddses'?"

"Yes. The Doddses'. We went straight to the guest house. I had it fixed up. It isn't ready, because I wasn't expecting them so soon. But they're satis-

fied."

There was a pause and Barbara murmured, "We walked past it once, Jimmy and I. It's partly your garage, isn't it?"

"What?" The old lady frowned. "Oh, yes. Yes, it is. They're upstairs."

Barbara nodded.

Something that might have been a snort came from the old lips. "I don't have a car now, so it isn't smelled up with gasoline and oil."

Gene thought sagely, *She doesn't like to talk about her fear either. She's afraid, terribly afraid.* But Harriet Van Allen went on: "They went in and I said I would walk to the house alone. They wanted to come, too, but I said we would wait until tomorrow. There had been"—she paused, took a deep breath, "—enough for today."

Again Barbara nodded.

"The lights were on in the kitchen and the dining-room. I had noticed that, and the doors were locked, just as they should be. I got out my keys" —she patted the beaded bag and it jangled mutely, "and I let myself in the kitchen."

The pause was long this time. Gene heard herself asking, "And then what, Mrs. Van Allen?"

"Then—I looked for Emma. She wasn't there. Only four places she could have been; all the rest of the rooms are locked and bolted. Emma wasn't there. She was gone. Gone!"

The old lady was keeping herself calm with difficulty. Gene could imagine what had happened. After looking inside the house in vain, fear had driven Harriet Van Allen to search for Emma outside. She had run out the front door, across the vast lawn.

Just how big it was, Gene could only guess. Harriet Van Allen turned to look back toward the house and the girls' eyes followed. Above the twisting black-clawed branches of the trees, the cupola of the Old House rose, a dim, thin shadow, losing itself in the blue-black sky. Repressing a shudder, Gene gave her attention to the old lady. She realized that Harriet Van Allen was shivering, despite the fur cape which she now held tightly about her.

"It never happened before," the old lady was whispering. "I could always depend on Emma. But now—"

Barbara stood up. "Aunt Harriet," she said, "if you can walk, I think you should go back. You're cold!"

"Go back?" The words echoed dully.

Gene nodded emphatically. "Yes, Mrs. Van Allen, Barbara's right. You really shouldn't be out here."

Again the old lady repeated, "Go back," but it was not a question. She seemed to be trying to gain the strength to face a decision. She looked from Barbara to Gene. "Yes," she said, "yes," and sighed.

Gene put her hand under the old lady's arm.

"Try to stand, Mrs. Van Allen. See if it hurts you."

Barbara was at her other side. "Lean on us, Aunt Harriet."

Still sitting, Mrs. Van Allen looked up at them. "You—you'll go with me?"

"Why, certainly," Barbara said, and looked at Gene.

Gene said, "Of course we will."

"All right." The old lady bent forward, then stood. For a moment she swayed, but she hastily reassured the girls: "I'm all right. I can walk. I've turned that ankle before."

Barbara murmured something, but Gene did not catch the words. They turned toward the incline, where a gravel path twined in among the trees and was lost. Gene could not remember a time when she was more reluctant to move forward.

Slowly they moved up and up. Noticing that the old lady was no longer leaning so heavily upon her arm, Gene asked, "Is your foot better, Mrs. Van Allen?"

The lady seemed startled. "My foot? Oh—that. Yes, it's better. I told you, it's happened before." Abruptly she stopped. Her tone lowered. "There are other things worrying me more. Things that never happened before." Her eyes darted to the right and the left. And, in the gloom, Gene saw that not far ahead the path divided. It led, too, to more level ground.

"Let me see," Harriet Van Allen murmured, "we had better take the left trail. That'll bring us to the front gate."

Barbara managed a kind of laugh. "Oh, yes, we have to get through that big fence, don't we? It looks like iron, and it's so high."

"It is iron," Harriet Van Allen said, "and if I remember right, it locked behind me. I hope I have that key—I must have." She paused for a moment. "No, we'll get to the gate first. Then I'll look."

They moved onward. The film of darkness about them suddenly lightened. Looking up, Gene saw that the moon had come out from behind a bank of clouds. A wind brought to life a hundred whispering dry tongues; their overhead secrets mingled with the swishing of the carpet underfoot. Mostly to hear the sound of her own voice, Gene said, "Does the autumn always come so early?"

"Autumn?" Harriet Van Allen said, again in surprise. "No, I believe not. We had an early frost." She pointed ahead to where the path became a trail. "Over there's the gate."

They went the rest of the way without speaking, coming at last to the place where the iron spikes of the fence met in a forbidding looking gate.

Harriet Van Allen said, "I'm all right," and disentangled her arms. She delved into her beaded bag and brought out her keys, twenty at least, all

tied on a stout black cord. "Now," she said, "we'll see." She ran her fingers over the various keys and presently gave a grunt of satisfaction. "It's here," she said, and stepped to the heavy lock. The creaking gate was opened and the three went on again.

"There's no path up from here," the old lady told them. "The main entrance is at the side of the place. So watch your step."

Gene thought as they plodded upward again that it was little short of a miracle that the old lady had not fallen long before she reached the stone steps. The lawn was not a steady incline, but a series of small terraces. Now Gene could plainly see the Old House at the top of the hill. The moon was behind the high cupola which seemed lost in a cloud all its own. The tall, thin windows presented a chill aspect, and a cold emptiness shrouded the two top floors. The lower part of the house, angular and sprawling, showed a lattice of light here and there. *Shutters,* Gene thought.

She said to herself, *It's even worse close-up than from a distance. I don't care if it is crammed full of treasures, it must be ghastly to live in such a place!*

Perhaps Barbara thought the same, because Gene was sure the girl uttered a sigh. Gene looked over at her friend, but Barbara seemed to become suddenly rigid. She said, "Listen, Aunt Harriet." Then to Gene: "Do you hear that?"

They all heard a shuffling in the leaves. Then a

high voice lisped, "Why, Missus! If you didn't give me a scare! Where were you, Missus? I looked everywhere!"

Harriet Van Allen exclaimed, "Emma!"

Emma was a small, stout person, with a knot of white hair at the top of her head. Hatless, she wore a long woolen coat, unbuttoned and showing a light blue cotton dress. Her hands fluttered like birds. "Oh, Missus, I'm so glad everything's all right." She became aware of the girls. "Oh—?" she said questioningly.

"Emma," Harriet Van Allen said flatly, "where have you been?"

"Where have *I* been, Missus? Why, I went to the Little Store."

"You did!"

"Why, yes, Missus. Soon as you left, I got to thinking that Mrs. Dodds had asked about bread and coffee and butter, and when would the store open, and I thought I'd get them for her."

"You could have telephoned, Emma."

"That's what I did, or I tried to, but something went wrong with the phone. I wanted to call Louis about fixing that faucet, too, so I thought I'd best go to the Little Store and call him from there."

Harriet Van Allen heaved a deep sigh. "It's all right, Emma. Never mind."

The chubby hands waved again. "You're sure you're all right, Missus? I brought the things to

Mrs. Dodds and she said you'd come in, but then you didn't and I—"

"I tell you, it's all right, Emma. I—I went for a walk. Now, be quiet."

Emma was looking worriedly at the girls.

Harriet Van Allen said, "This is Barbara. You remember we went to the wedding."

Emma melted. "Oh, yes! It was so pretty!"

Barbara murmured a thank you, as Harriet went on, "And this is Gene, a friend of Barbara's. They were out walking and they met me, and came along. They're coming in for a while."

It was evident that Emma was greatly surprised. "My, now, that'll be so nice! But, Missus, if you don't mind, tomorrow's the day I do the second parlor, so—"

"It won't matter, Emma, I'm sure. Come on, now, let's get inside. I feel chilly."

There was still some distance to go before they came to the front door. If Emma noticed that her mistress was limping slightly, she held her peace. A wide wooden walk led to the broad steps, but Gene scarcely noticed the creaking boards, for her attention was upon the slits of light that crept through the shutters. Such high, high windows! Harriet Van Allen, leading the way up to a porch that ran around one side of the house, said to Emma, "Can't see in."

Emma said, with pride, "Not at all, Missus."

They went up to the door. Gene had to bend her

head back to see to the top of a door of dull, decorated glass ending in a Gothic point at the top.

She heard herself say, "I've never seen a door like this before!"

Harriet Van Allen was inserting a key. "I guess not," she said with satisfaction. The next instant, the door opened without a sound and a flood of light met them. They walked into an amazingly long hall, more like the corridor of some public building or some museum, Gene thought. Along the hall were various settees, high mirrors, and richly carved chairs. Two life-sized oil paintings portrayed scenes of the hunt. One was the preparation, with hunters and dogs, and the other, the killing of a deer.

Gene did not especially care for either of them. Emma, at her elbow, must have noticed her expression. The little housekeeper said, her two hands clasped almost in an attitude of prayer, "The Mister used to paint. I was here when he did the two of them. But it's been a long time since we've had anybody to admire them. Until today, that is. Mr. and Mrs. Dodds came today, you know and—"

"They know, Emma." This was Harriet Van Allen. "Please close the door, will you?"

"Oh, yes, Missus."

A smile hovered about Gene's lips as she watched the little woman bustle back to close the great door. She thought, *Don't worry, I won't say a word to hurt Mrs. Van Allen's feelings. The furniture might be*

wonderful—it probably is—but those pictures are awful! However, she felt a liking for the little housekeeper. Emma was not fooled. She knew well enough that her mistress was upset and wanted to be sure that nothing further would trouble her.

"There, now," Emma said, coming from the door. "Now, what, Missus?"

Harriet Van Allen, standing beside a carved settee, one hand against the arm, was looking down the hall toward a curving stairway. Gene's eyes, following, saw the woodwork gleaming in the light which came from three wide-spaced chandeliers overhead.

Barbara, who had been standing near one of the paintings, spoke up. "Perhaps we'd better run along now, Aunt Harriet. You must be tired."

The old lady looked at her searchingly. "No, not tired," she said.

For a moment their eyes held. Harriet Van Allen's glance seemed to say: *You know, Barbara. You know now that we have had the sign of the Ainslees. And you are an Ainslee!*

Barbara's eyes seemed glued, helplessly, against her will, to the old lady's face. She drew back a little and said in a voice that rang falsely, "I—I'm glad you aren't tired, Aunt Harriet. It—was quite a little walk."

The old lady grunted and turned to Emma. "Take them into the dining-room," she said. "I'm going

up and change my shoes." She began to unfasten her fur cape.

They were about halfway down the corridor, standing before a massive gold-edged mirror. Gene, glancing at it, caught Barbara's reflection. The girl who had been watching Harriet Van Allen turned her head away. Her eyes made one sweeping gesture and then met Gene's in the mirror. Gene could feel them pleading: *Oh, let's go back, Gene! I don't want to stay here!*

Gene was of the same mind, but she knew that they must stay, for a time at least. She tried to get this idea to Barbara. Her friend nodded quietly. Wordlessly it was decided between them that, as soon as possible, they would go back to the Ainslee house.

Barbara said, "We can't stay too long, Aunt Harriet."

"No, I suppose not." The old lady slipped out of her fur cape, which Emma was quick to take. Her short fingers reached up for the large hat. Laden with these, Emma made her way to one of the carved chairs.

"I'll leave them here for now," she smiled at the girls, "and we'll go into the dining-room." This last was said for the old lady's benefit. "We'll wait for you there, Missus."

"You do that." Slowly, but firmly enough, Harriet Van Allen walked down the long hall. Emma had

"Emma! Take Them into the Dining Room."

put out a hand to lead the girls back toward the front entrance, but Gene watched Mrs. Van Allen. She saw the old lady's hand touch the broad, curving bannister, and saw her walk slowly up. As Gene turned toward Emma, she found two deep-set blue eyes regarding her searchingly.

"Now, Miss—Miss Gene," Emma said, flustered, "if you'll come back this way. And you, too, Miss Barbara, of course."

Emma had said "Miss Barbara," and neither of the girls made any correction. Perhaps Barbara did not notice it. Gene thought, *I wish she were Miss Barbara again, away from all these secrets and signs!* But they were very much a part of the present, of the deep and penetrating quiet, the unfriendly air that hung heavily in the Old House. That it was unfriendly, Gene felt as truly as though a living presence were frowning upon her. Emma's lisping, eager voice did not dispel the gloom, and Emma's hand on her arm, leading her, seemed somehow to further the approach of disaster. So deeply was she sunk in her thoughts, that when the housekeeper paused abruptly and said, "Wait! I want to tell you something!" Gene's hand went to her mouth and she almost cried out.

Barbara must have been under the spell, too, for she exclaimed in a husky whisper, "What is it? What is it, Emma!"

They were near the pictures, facing the grim hunt-

er and the stricken deer. Emma drew the two girls toward her, one on either side. She pointed to the right, near the front entrance. "See that door?" she asked, and the girls nodded, waiting. It was black, of many small panels, and tightly closed.

"That goes to the first parlor," Emma whispered. "It's locked." Her hand motioned to another door not far from where they stood. "And there's the second parlor. That's locked, too. But I do both of those rooms. Once every week; you understand?"

Puzzled, the girls waited. Emma waited a moment, too, moistening her lips and glancing stealthily toward the stairway. Her hand, shaking, rose again, and she pointed far down the hall, to the right of the stairs. "But that door is never unlocked. I mean to say, never when I'm about. I—I've never seen the inside of the Mister's study. Once a month, the Missus goes in there. She says the greatest treasure is in that room."

Emma paused so long that Gene could not bear the silence. She seemed to hear the beating of unseen, dark wings—perhaps the pounding of her own heart. She heard her voice, shaky, but with more assurance than she felt, saying, "Well, maybe the greatest treasure *is* in there, Emma. Something Mrs. Van Allen does not wish to share."

The blue eyes blinked up at her. Emma said, "Yes. But you don't understand, Miss Gene. That door is never unlocked. Yet when I came in this

evening, after I left the Dodds people, and found the Missus gone, I—" she seemed to choke, "I thought I heard something moving in that room!"

Barbara said under her breath, "Oh—" and one look at her stricken face brought Gene to her senses. She felt a warm surge of anger at everything and everybody seemingly joined in a campaign of intangible dread, making her friend appear like a pitiful little stray ghost.

Gene said, her tone flat with reality, "You *thought* you heard something in that room, Emma. Can you say you're sure you did? Absolutely positive?"

"We—ll, no."

"All right. That's settled." But the housekeeper, too, Gene realized, had a part of this worry and dread. Gene felt herself soften. She said kindly but still in a matter-of-fact tone, "You know, there are so many trees near the house, Emma. You might have heard a branch scraping against one of the windows. You see? The sound might have been from that direction, but outside the house."

Emma's blue eyes warmed. "Now, that's true." Emma was close to smiling, and it was a good thing to see. Her blue eyes, the button of a nose, the pursed mouth with its network of wrinkles relaxed for a moment, but not for long. She looked back toward the stairway, and making sure the lady of the house was not coming down as yet, she said swiftly, "Come into the dining-room. The Missus wants you there,

and I—I want to ask you something."

Barbara sent Gene a swift look which said, *Now what?* but they went with the housekeeper to the first door on the left near the front entrance. Like the other doors, this one was high and many-paneled, closed, but, the girls discovered, not locked.

As Emma went ahead to open it, she murmured, "Gracious! I didn't take off my coat." Swiftly she slipped out of her wrap and placed it over the arm of a Chinese settee. "I'll put 'em away later," she said to herself, turning a large, cream-colored knob. The room was flooded with light—the light which Harriet Van Allen had been pleased to note did not show much from the outside.

Emma was saying rapidly, "Perhaps it seems strange to you that this is the dining-room, but the Missus wanted it that way."

The thought had not occurred to Gene, but now that Emma mentioned it, it was strange that the parlors would be on one side of the corridor, and this first room to the left of the main entrance should be the dining-room.

Emma went on to explain, "The Missus rests and reads in here, too. Most of her meals she takes in the little dining-place in the kitchen." Emma pointed to an archway which led toward the back of the house into another room as vast as this. Gene noted that these two rooms, the dining-room and the kitchen, took up one whole side of the first floor.

Emma was saying, "If you'll just sit down, now. I—I want to ask you something. And please don't think I'm a meddling busybody. But I—I have the Missus to think about, you know."

Barbara murmured something as she gazed about the room. Gene said, "I've never seen such a large dining-room in a private home."

For Barbara's sake she did not want particularly to hear what Emma had to say. The girl looked white and drawn. Gene kept close to her as they seated themselves on the high, curving settee.

Before Emma put her latest question into words, Gene looked about the room, which was lighted by an enormous chandelier. Just as the Ainslee home seemed to be shut in away from the world, the six high windows with their tight shutters certainly closed in this space. In one corner was a white marble fireplace, topped with many china oddities. Two fragile baking cupboards, about seven feet high, were filled with china and glass and silver. Under the three windows at the front of the house were another settee and several chairs, all tufted with some stiff, black, shiny material. Near a rocking chair containing a limp pillow was a table laden with books and magazines.

Emma was saying, her eyes on the hall door, "And no curtains! The Missus won't have a curtain on the windows."

Barbara said, "It is like a museum, isn't it, Gene?"

"Um hum," Gene answered. She was noticing the dining-table, which was small, almost unimportant in the sea of red carpet. Four narrow, wooden chairs with high backs were set primly about the table.

Emma did not sit down, but took her stand between the girls and the hall door and said almost in a whisper, "Please, will you tell me how you happened to meet the Missus this evening?"

"Why," Barbara said, "we—we just met her." She looked swiftly at Gene, but Emma went on: "I mean, wasn't she upset-like? Do you know if—if anything was wrong?"

Barbara bit her lip. Gene knew that the girl was wondering whether Emma should be told about the earlier happening of the evening. Was it their place to tell her?

Emma talked on swiftly, "There isn't time for me to tell you, but I'm so worried. And even if I did tell you, you wouldn't understand."

She wrung her chubby hands together.

Gene found herself watching those fingers, watching the pearl buttons on the sedate, blue dress. Emma was unmindful that she might soon pull the belt button loose. With another glance at the door, she said, "We—we have company here so seldom—hardly ever. It seems so odd, seeing you two girls sitting there on the sofa." Her eyes remained on the hall door. She went on almost as if to herself: "I thought the Dodds people would help. She—she

put an ad in the paper, and they wrote her. She asked them to come. So they did—this afternoon. They were the first people to come here in so long! You see, she doesn't see enough people. It's different with me, now. I've got my boy in town and I go and visit him—and some friends." She paused for breath. "Oh, I don't know how to say it!"

Gene said it for her. "You mean, it was strange that Mrs. Van Allen left the house alone, after she came back from her brother's, don't you, Emma?"

"Yes, Miss Gene. It's been a long time since she visited him, but she said she wanted privacy. But to rush out—alone! Why—it's odd! She goes to the bank every second week." Emma looked at Barbara. "We saw Master Jimmy there two weeks ago. He said he was going up north to see about an auction."

Barbara said in a small voice, "Yes, he has gone."

"But—" Emma seemed to have some difficulty in getting her thoughts in order "—that's the way it is. I do the marketing. The Missus—!" She broke off, for she heard her mistress returning down the hallway. Her footsteps were muted in the thick carpeting so her coming was more sudden than any of the three had expected.

When Harriet Van Allen entered upon the sudden silence of the dining-room, she looked bleakly at the housekeeper. "What's all the whispering about, Emma?" she asked.

"Why, Missus—" Emma floundered.

Gene smiled as she rose. "Emma thinks it's nice to have company, Mrs. Van Allen, and we've enjoyed seeing your lovely home."

It was the beginning of a gracious exit, but Harriet Van Allen snorted. "You haven't seen it yet. There's a lot more to it than this."

Emma was ogling her mistress. "You mean, you're going to—open the doors—at this hour, ma'am?"

"And what if I do?" the lady snapped. "You'd think the world was coming to an end!"

That was close to what Emma had been thinking, but she said, meekly patient in her devotion, "Oh, Missus, whatever you want."

Suddenly from the vast, adjoining kitchen, the telephone rang. Emma started, and Harriet Van Allen said, "It's working now. Go answer it, Emma."

The short stout figure waddled away, and Barbara tried to renew the subject of their leaving. The old lady edged away from the thought, murmuring something about the parlors. It was evident that she was waiting for Emma to come back with the message.

The call, Emma said, was from Elsie Ainslee. "Mrs. Ainslee says that Mister Stuart isn't feeling so well, Missus. She thought you ought to know."

Gene heard Barbara's little cry and she saw the look that passed between the old lady and the girl.

Harriet Van Allen said, "Maybe it's—happened

already, Barbara!"

Barbara was standing, her hands clenched at her sides. "I don't believe it!" she cried. "Not any of it! Maybe Father Ainslee isn't feeling well, but that has nothing to do with a clock you can't see. I won't believe it, I tell you! I won't!"

But Gene thought that she did believe it and was only fighting her belief. Dazedly, Harriet Van Allen put a hand to her head. Emma gave a sharp cry. "So that was it! You heard the ticking of the clock, Missus! Oh, I knew something had happened. I knew it!"

Harriet Van Allen said harshly, "Please stop shouting!"

"Oh, Missus!" Emma moaned. "I knew it—over at their house this evening. And here too, Missus. I'd swear to it! Open the study door, and you'll see I'm right! You'll see!"

CHAPTER FOUR

CALL IN THE NIGHT

Gene leaned back wearily in the deep chair, enjoying a measure of peace after the hectic happenings of the past hours. It seemed such a long time since she had arrived at the Ainslee home, filled with joy at the sight of Barbara. The joy, she reflected wryly, had been short-lived. The Barbara she knew was gone. Another girl, worried and pale, now walked softly about the rooms upstairs where Elsie Ainslee watched at the bedside of her husband. Their muted voices came down to her.

Elsie had maintained her composure, Gene recalled. She had met them at the door, and asked if they had enjoyed their walk.

But she was worried, Gene thought. *She must have been, or she wouldn't have called Mrs. Van Allen!*

The girls had not told her they knew of that call. There had not been time. Elsie took it for granted that they had walked across the bridge enjoying nothing more stirring than a friendly chat. They did not enlighten her.

"We didn't have the Enrights after all," Elsie had explained. "Stuart wasn't feeling well, so I

called them. They were so disappointed."

Barbara's whisper was weak. "Is Father Ainslee—very ill?"

"Very ill?" Elsie considered that. "I think not. But he's in bed now. I was making him more comfortable. If you wish, Barbara dear, you may help me a bit." She smiled at Gene. "If you'll excuse us for a little while—"

Gene said, "Oh, certainly. Is there anything I can do?"

"Oh, no, my dear. Thank you just the same. Barbara knows where things are, and Stuart can tell us what he wants. He is a doctor, you know."

Gene nodded, wondering if a really sick doctor were able to prescribe for himself. But then she told herself she could not know how ill the man was. Elsie should know.

So, feeling a bit shelved and unnecessary, Gene waited in the living-room while Barbara served as nurse's aid. She thought, *Elsie may appreciate Barby more than either of them realizes. Maybe it is a good thing this happened. Maybe Elsie will wake up and really get to know Barby.*

As she looked at the folds of the red drapes, she thought of another house, the Old House, where Harriet Van Allen and Emma were enmeshed in their own particular web of worry. The old lady had not wanted them to go; neither had Emma. But Barbara thought it was her duty to hurry back.

and it was, of course. Gene was glad for several reasons that they had left the dreary, treasure-stuffed mansion.

I wonder, she said to herself, *if Harriet Van Allen opened her study.* She sighed. *The poor dears,* her thoughts ran on, *I'd feel sorry for them just for having to live in that awful place.* But there were more reasons than that to feel pity for the elderly pair. Heavy over Harriet Van Allen's head lay her dread of the unseen clock, the sign which told of disaster to come.

Well, had it?

Gene suddenly felt chilly. Her eyes wandered toward the narrow stairs which were a small reproduction of the circular stairway she had seen not long ago. Beyond those stairs Barbara whispered with Elsie Ainslee.

Barbara was under this spell, too. Barbara might be—next!

Gene came to her feet. "Oh, what am I thinking?" she demanded aloud of herself. "It's simply coincidence. The man hasn't been well for some time. That's no news."

Like Barbara, Gene was fighting the conviction that sought to engulf her. Like Barbara's, her inner self was protesting: *I won't believe it.*

She thought, then, that she heard Barbara's voice, that her friend was coming down the stairs. Turning toward the hallway, she waited. The clock in the

adjoining room struck ten. Barbara did not come.

The sense of being out of place grew and deepened. Gene was beginning to wish she had not come at all, when she heard Elsie saying, "Yes, I think that would be best. You do that," and then Barbara came quietly down the stairs.

"Oh, Gene!" Pushing back her dark hair, Barbara crossed the room swiftly. "Did you think I'd forgotten you?"

"You had your hands full enough without thinking about me, honey." Gene motioned to the couch. "Sit down and relax."

Barby sank into the pillows. She drew a deep breath. Gene watched her for a moment.

"How is he, Barby?"

"He's sleeping now." Barbara's eyes went to the stairs, then back to Gene's face. "You know what, Gene?"

Whatever it was, it was good. Barbara's eyes were misty with an inner glow. Gene said, "What?"

"I — I think she was glad to have me with her."

"I think so, too."

"Do you, really? Oh, I'm so glad. You know, it was — different tonight. I wasn't worried for fear I'd say or do the wrong thing. It was — nice."

"That's fine, Barby. That's the way it should be."

"Yes." Barbara held on to the word, leaning back. Her thoughts were still dwelling upon the wonder of a new understanding. Under lowered lashes, Gene

watched that quiet, sweet face. She wondered, *Will it last?* and hoped fervently that it would. She realized that she had been expecting Barbara to be anything but hopeful and happy. Emma's words still rang in Gene's ear: "You heard the ticking of the clock! Oh, I knew something had happened!"

Barbara seemed to have forgotten the Ainslee warning. Certainly it appeared that she did not regard Stuart Ainslee's illness as the inevitable sequel to the ill omen. It was strange. Watching her friend, Gene could come to but one conclusion: Elsie Ainslee must believe that Stuart's trouble sprang from an unhappy but quite ordinary cause. At least Elsie evidently had made it appear that she believed this. If she had, whatever her own conviction, she had accomplished something worth while. Gene experienced a sudden appreciation for the older woman. Whatever her smaller faults might be, in this emergency she had done well.

So had Barbara. Between the two of them, a sense of happy family harmony had blossomed.

Fine, Gene thought. Barbara was looking at her and smiling tiredly — but smiling. Gene thought again, *Fine. Splendid. But I still feel definitely out of place.*

Barbara gave a sigh so deep her shoulders moved. She said with sudden animation, "Well, we'd better get our bunk ready. We're going to take the blue room. It's farthest down the hall."

"Oh, am I going to put you to a lot of bother?"

"Why, of course not, Gene!" Barbara came to her feet too briskly, it seemed. "It's no trouble at all. Why, I've waited and waited for you to come!" Her dark eyes moved toward the stairs. "It's just too bad things had to be so upset."

The telephone pealed suddenly, sharply, and Barbara jumped, saying, "Oh! Who can that be?" She sped from the room. Before the telephone could complete a second ring, Barbara reached it. Gene heard her murmured "Hello," but could not understand what followed.

Again she waited for what seemed a long time. At last Barbara stopped talking and Gene heard her coming back. Before she reached the living-room, however, Elsie Ainslee called down softly from upstairs: "Who was it, Barbara? Anything important?"

"No," Barbara told her. "It was for me."

"Oh, very well, dear." Elsie went back into the bedroom and Barbara returned to Gene. But even before Gene caught a glimpse of her face, she felt certain that something was wrong. When she saw Barbara, she was sure of it.

"Bad news?" Gene asked.

"It was—Emma," Barbara whispered. She glanced toward the stairs, and her voice dropped still lower. "You know, Aunt Harriet's housekeeper."

Gene knew. She had said nothing because of her wildly whirling thoughts. A mocking voice seemed

"It Was—Emma," Barbara Whispered.

to rise from the very depths of her being, a sneering, hateful voice that said, *No, it didn't last! It was too good to last!*

Gene fought to make her tone natural. "Oh. What did she want?"

"She asked me if I could come over for awhile."

"Now?"

"Yes." Barbara's hands were twisting together. She looked back in the direction of the telephone as though expecting to see the figure of Emma standing there.

Gene asked, "Did she say why, Barby?"

"N-Not exactly. She said it was important, that's all."

"And what did you say?" Gene felt that she must draw the words from that stiff, small mouth. "What did you tell her, Barby?"

"Why, I said that I thought Mother Ainslee needed me here. And then Emma asked about Father Ainslee and I told her he was resting easily. She said of course I'd have to stay. It almost seemed she'd forgotten that he was ill."

Barbara paused, and Gene waited. She knew there was more. The dark eyes evaded her gaze for a long moment and then Barbara faced her directly. "Gene, she asked if you could come."

"Oh?" Something rose in Gene's throat, choking her. "What did you tell her?"

"Why, I said I didn't know. I'd have to ask you."

Then the words came in a rush. "Oh, Gene, I don't see why you should! I can't understand why Emma could even think of asking it! Even if Mrs. Van Allen is my aunt, why, I — I hardly know her. And you're my guest!"

As they stood in the deep quiet of the living-room, a heavier quiet came between them, in which only their eyes spoke. Perhaps Barbara was thinking the same thing that tortured Gene's imagination, that the curse of the Ainslees had fallen upon the Old House. Had Harriet Van Allen opened the door of the study, or had some new, fresh fear come from another source?

Gene heard her own voice saying, "Emma didn't really say why, did she?"

"No. Only that it was important."

"And she said *for awhile.*"

"That's right. Oh, Gene, you aren't thinking of going over there, are you? Why, you don't even know them."

Gene's thoughts raced along: *Oh, yes, I do know them — I know them far too well. I've seen something of that Old House with the two old ladies in a kind of whirlpool of apprehension, black waters that mounted this night so that Harriet Van Allen rushed out of that high, pointed door, out through the iron gateway.*

Barbara was saying, "Gene — ?"

Gene was thinking: *And I'll go back there. Back*

through the iron gate again. Then she felt Barbara's hand on her arm.

"Gene, what is the matter?"

"Oh." Gene was back again in the Ainslee living-room. "I was just thinking, Barby. I guess I'd better run over there for a little while."

That was the right thing to say, and the right way to say it. Perhaps her heart was getting the better of her judgment, but Gene felt an inner warmth. It spread, giving her a sense of sudden pleasant well-being, quite out of keeping with the prospect that awaited her. But there was not only that, Gene reflected swiftly — there was Barbara's peace of mind. Barbara must not be left in a state of worry and dread.

"Oh, Gene! At this hour! Why, it's bedtime."

"Is it?" Gene smiled.

"Well, I thought you must be dead-tired. After all — "

"After all, it's only ten o'clock, Barby."

"I know, but — oh, Gene, I don't want you to go back over there, alone."

"I won't. I'll call a cab. That'll be quicker."

Barbara bit her lip. "I don't see why you want to go."

I don't want to go, my dear, Gene thought. *I don't want to go at all. But I like those two old dears and I feel terribly sorry for them. If they want me to come, I haven't any choice in the matter.*

Barby said, "It just doesn't make sense!" Her hand was up, pushing at the side of her face, the fingertips lost in her dark hair.

"Oh, I think it does," Gene managed to say quite easily. "They wanted us to stay before, remember? They're lonesome, Barby — that's most of the trouble."

"Do you think so?"

"Of course. Your Aunt Harriet is finding out that it's better to have people around once in a while. You remember she asked us to come back very soon."

"Y-Yes," Barbara admitted. The ghost of a smile played at the corners of her mouth. "But this is almost too soon, don't you think?"

"The sooner the better," Gene pronounced. "Suppose you call a cab for me, hm? And give me some idea what—what it's all about?"

"Why, of course. Oh, I wish I could go, too."

"You can't, Barby. Your place is here."

As though it were an endorsement of Gene's statement, Elsie's voice came down softly: "Barbara, can you come up for just a minute?"

"I'll be right up," Barbara promised, but stayed because Gene held her arm.

"Listen, Barby, I'd better not call back. Can you leave the door unlocked?"

Barbara nodded. "Yes, but — "

"And tell me, where's the blue room?"

"Why, go upstairs, turn to the right down the hall-

way. It's the second door."

"That's settled, then. I'll come right on up."

"But — but, Gene!"

"Can't you see it's the only thing to do, Barby? You stay here and keep up the good work for Elsie, and I'll do the same across the way. It's Girl Scout Open House night, or something."

Barbara hugged her then. "You make everything seem so right!"

"That's the second time you've given me that compliment, honey. Thanks a lot. But now, you'd better hurry on up there. I'll put in my own calls." She gave Barbara a small push. "Trot now — I'll be seeing you."

Barbara was smiling as she whispered, "Okay," and Gene said to herself, *That's that.* Before she could become involved in another deluge of uncomfortable thought, she hurried to the telephone. She called Emma first.

"Bless your dear little heart," the housekeeper said fervently.

"Can you give me some idea — ?" Gene asked her.

Emma's voice was muted, as though she did not wish to disturb her mistress. "It's my boy, Miss Gene. He's been taken sick suddenly. I've got to get to the hospital."

It was not good news, but so much better than musty, forbidding rooms that must remain locked and bolted that Gene's heart soared.

Then Emma added, "Miss Gene, I might not get back for quite some time, and I don't want to leave the Missus. Do you think maybe you could stay?"

Gene gave the promise, then, that six hours ago would have seemed unbelievable. Now it appeared perfectly in order. Barbara was profiting by her new alliance; all was well here at the Ainslee home. Gene was not needed. In fact, she had felt rather in the way. And the way Emma had said, "Bless your dear little heart — !"

"I'll stay," Gene said. Before Emma could choke out her gratitude, Gene added, "I'll be over soon. 'By."

She called her cab and while she waited, collected her belongings. Her bag, she noted with satisfaction, had got no farther than the hall. She slipped into her suit coat, put on her hat. Then she thought of Barbara. The best thing would be to write a note.

In the kitchen was a pad and pencil. Gene dashed off the words swiftly, ending with: *Have breakfast ready at eight, or I'll be here to get it for you.*

"There!" She found a pin and placed the paper where it would be seen by anyone coming down the stairs. Barbara could explain what she chose of the meeting and the visit with Harriet Van Allen. Elsie, Gene was sure, would not be displeased. Why should she be? And Barbara would be relieved to know that the latest outcropping of misfortune had befallen someone not at all connected with the house of Ains-

lee.

So it was that Gene slipped out with little trepidation to wait for her cab at the end of the stone pathway. When she discovered that the driver was her friend of the early evening, her greeting was almost gay.

The man's admiration went up several notches upon discovering that Gene was going to the Old House. He had set her upon a high pinnacle before, but now Gene was a star of stars.

She was glad, however, that it was not far, and that the man liked the sound of his own voice so well. Again she heard about the beauties of the lake. Several times she might have taken a hint and answered the one question that burned in him — why was she going to the Old House "at this hour" — but Gene sidestepped it every time.

When they came to the place where the road led up to another and a wider gate, Gene got out. She had seen a light at the side of the house, and the figure of Emma standing there, waving to her.

"Thank you," Gene told the driver. "And this time I'll pay you."

"Oh, no, you won't, Miss. You pay me tomorrow, eh, when I call for you?"

Gene laughed. "All right. But you've got to promise, or I won't call you."

"It's a deal, Miss Gene." Standing, hat in hand, he looked past her to where Emma stood waiting.

Gene guessed that he would have a new wonder to add to his store for future customers. He had taken a guest to the Old House!

Gene saw then that the gate was moving, though Emma still stood on the top of a small flight of stone steps. *It must be worked from the house,* she thought, and slipped through the iron spikes. The housekeeper disappeared, evidently to press the gate control, for it swung closed as soon as Gene had slipped through it. Then the old lady was back again, her chubby hands outstretched.

As Gene hurried up the long, wide drive, Emma said, "It was so nice of you to come, Miss Gene. I don't know what I would have done!"

A little out of breath from running, Gene said, "That's quite a gate, Emma."

"Oh, yes. I wondered for a minute if it'd work or if I'd have to go way out. Sometimes it doesn't." She took Gene's arm. "Now, you come with me. We'll go around to the front door, where you came in before."

Gene looked at her questioningly, but Emma explained, "This side door comes in close to the stairs, Miss Gene, and the Missus is sleeping now, so I don't want to disturb her."

"I see," Gene said.

"You take my arm," — Emma extended it — "and we'll walk slow. There's no path here, and it's pretty dark."

It was dark, and getting darker every minute as they walked away from the lighted side entrance. Gene glanced up once at the walls of the mansion, but there were no gleams of light filtering through the shutters on this side. Trunks of trees seemed to loom up with a startling suddenness, but Emma knew every step of the way. She maneuvered them safely through the rustling mounds of dry leaves.

Gene said, when a silence fell between them, "I'm so sorry about your son, Emma."

"Yes." The housekeeper seemed to stumble. She was leading Gene, but she was leaning upon the girl's arm, nevertheless. In the dim, bluish glow, Gene could not see her face, but the shoulders were bent as under a weight. "Yes," Emma said, and it was almost like a sob, "now of all times." Her free hand came around to press against Gene's arm. "I — I'll tell you all about it."

She either did not want to speak of the matter now — or could not. Gene looked at her, trying to pierce the darkness, but Emma's face was turned toward the house. She hurried her footsteps and soon they came to the front entrance. There was no light over the high, pointed door.

Emma said, "I'll go up ahead. Wait a minute."

"All right." Gene stood there while the housekeeper made her way sidewise up the steps, paused briefly, perhaps to get her breath, and then went in. For perhaps half a minute Gene was alone — in the

darkness. Suddenly the events which had occurred to alter all her plans and bring her here to this forlorn spot seemed to be without meaning. No—worse, there *was* a meaning in the strange pattern, and Gene felt it with an impact that was almost physical. She knew in a chilled moment the meaning of fear. For Barbara's sake, first of all, she had been afraid. She had wanted to shield Barbara, to protect her.

That was all very good, she thought. *Then why didn't I stay with Barbara? Why did I come here anyway?*

She wanted to turn around and rush back to the gate. She wanted to call out to the driver, "Come back! I'm going to the Ainslees' right now, not tomorrow morning!"

But the driver had gone. The gate was shut — and locked.

She looked up at the cold glass of the door. *I won't go in!* she told herself. *I'll tell Emma I've changed my mind. She can get somone else to stay with Mrs. Van Allen.* The glass seemed to wink faintly. *Why does she have to have someone to stay with her, anyway?* Gene wondered. *Why can't she be alone for awhile? I won't do it!*

Then a light was turned on and there was Emma standing in the doorway again, her chubby hand outstretched. "Come on up, honey, and watch your step."

Gene's feet moved upward, but she did not go

inside.

"Emma," she said with difficulty, "I've been wondering, isn't there anyone else you might call to come in tonight?"

The housekeeper fell back as though she had been struck. "Miss Gene, what makes you say that—now?"

"Oh," Gene looked back at the gnarled trees, and then down below, where the lights of civilization twinkled, not far, but still so removed from this lonesome place. She faced Emma again, faced the wide blue eyes, and floundered. "I was just thinking—maybe I wouldn't be much help, that's all."

"Much help!" the old woman repeated. "Honey, you can't imagine how I need you here tonight." She nodded toward the corridor. "How she needs you, I might say. You know what the Missus said after you went? She said, 'Emma, if I had had a girl like that of my own everything would have been different.' It was you, Miss Gene, she wanted to stay most of all this evening. Oh, she does think Barbara is a dear girl, and she is, but the Missus sets a lot of store by you, Miss Gene."

There was that tug again, pulling at her heart. Gene's mind said, *You have no business here, none whatsoever. Go away, while you still have time.* But her heart said, *The poor, poor dear. The two poor dears!*

She heard Emma saying, "You'll be comfy, Miss Gene. I've put fresh sheets on my bed, because my

room's closest to hers and I don't expect I'll be able to be back. You see, I know Miss Pringle and she comes on at eleven o'clock. She said I could have a cot near my boy. He — he's out of the ether by now."

Emma's mouth was twisting. Her hands, rubbing together, made a dry sound. "Maybe," she went on, swallowing, "maybe she won't even wake up, and again, maybe she will. Oh, Miss Gene, if you only knew what we've been through here tonight!"

The woman's teeth began to chatter, and Gene herself felt the chill wind. She said, "Let's close the door, Emma. You — you'll want to get to the hospital."

"Then you'll stay?"

"I— guess so." Even as the door closed, Gene saw her hope being closed out with it, herself imprisoned inside the gloom of the Old House. She heard her own stiff voice saying, "What happened, Emma?"

Emma led her toward the dining-room, casting a quick look toward the circular stairway. "I'll tell you, Miss Gene. Put your bag down here. We — we'll have to hurry, my dear."

Gene let herself be led back to the sofa and Emma sat close behind her, on the edge. She still wore her woolen coat, buttoned up under her pointed chin. Her hands went to the top button. "I'll tell you quick, Miss Gene," she promised. "It was about the study."

That, Gene knew, was what she had been expect-

ing all along. The locked room. Emma had heard sounds in there, and she, Gene, had easily explained them away. Had her explanation been correct?

"I was a bit beside myself," Emma was saying, "when I heard about the — the sign and then Mr. Stuart's sickness — "

Gene said, "Yes, I know." She wanted this over and done with. Emma drew a deep sigh. "It was something like you said, Miss Gene. A shutter had come loose. That was all. I didn't see it, you understand. Only the Missus went in, but she told me."

Gene felt let down and somewhat irritated. "Well, that should have been a relief, Emma."

"Oh, it was, my dear — it was. But it upset her, don't you see? And then, the Dodds people came over. Mrs. Dodds said they had a bit of an idea they would like to talk about for a few minutes, because they usually did their best thinking at night."

Emma paused so long that Gene prompted her: "Then what?"

"Well, the Missus said they knew all about what had happened over at Mr. Stuart's, about the — the sign — and she said maybe she might not have them do the book at all. She said if anything like that happened again she'd sell all the treasures and we'd go away, the Missus and I."

That seemed to be the end of Emma's story, and she appeared to be waiting for a properly horrified reply, which Gene could not quite deliver. Again

she felt a sense of anticlimax.

Emma was looking at her searchingly. "Oh, you don't understand, Miss Gene. You don't know what the treasures mean to the Missus. You haven't even seen the parlors."

"I can imagine," Gene said. Her eyes went about the dining-room. "I don't know what all these various pieces are worth, but I can guess."

"This is only a small part of it, Miss Gene. There are the cupboards on the second floor, and the two rooms on the third. They're all crammed full. The Missus, why, she just lives for these things. And when she says she's going to sell them! Why, it's like a mother going to part with her children!"

Gene shook her head. "I admit I can't understand it, Emma. I can't see how anybody could be so in love with just *things*."

Emma's hand went to Gene's arm. "Oh, I don't know how to talk like I wish I could, Miss Gene. Please don't get any odd notion about the Missus. She's — well — that's all she's got."

A little sigh escaped Gene. "I know that, Emma, and I do like Mrs. Van Allen. It's just that — well, I don't see why she shouldn't be able to stay here alone tonight."

Emma stood up. "All right, Miss Gene. I'll stay then. I won't go to my boy." The old mouth was quivering so that one of the chubby hands went up to hide it. "But — but I don't see why you said you

would, or why you did come."

"Oh, I don't know either, Emma!" Gene rose swiftly. "It just seemed that I had to. But now that I am here, I feel out of place. It all seems so — unnecessary."

But it was the same at the Ainslee house. Gene had felt unnecessary there, too. It had seemed vastly better for her to leave Barbara and Elsie. They were united in a way that Gene and Barbara had never been. There was an invisible bond that held them — a sign, the ticking of an unseen clock. And that same mysterious omen had a meaning in this fated house. Gene thought, *This is all absolutely fantastic! I don't belong here at all!*

She saw Emma looking at her like a stricken thing and heard her say, "It isn't unnecessary, Miss Gene. I wouldn't have called you if it was. I wanted to tell her before I went and let her know you were here. I wouldn't go otherwise."

Gene said, under her breath, "I shouldn't have come." She meant the whole trip, this visit to Lake Morra. Time was important, and visits were something to plan months ahead.

Emma thought she meant she shouldn't have come to the Old House. She put in one last plea: "I'll be back by six o'clock, Miss Gene. Maybe the Missus will sleep right through the night. But if she gets to walking—"

"Walking?" Gene said.

"Well, yes, in her sleep, you know. But she always comes first and knocks on my door." Emma said this almost meekly, looking up like a whipped puppy who has been guilty of a new offense, but punished for only one. "I — I just ease her back to her room, that's all."

That was enough, Gene felt. But beyond the horizon of the night's uncertain duties, there lay the hope of dawn at six o'clock. It would be for only one night, Gene thought. Six o'clock would come soon, and then she, Gene, would take her quick departure, away from the Old House and, soon after that, away from Lake Morra. Somehow, she would bribe Barbara into coming to see her. That would be better. Much better. They could enjoy themselves peacefully, without all this grim and forbidding atmosphere of disaster.

Gene said, patting the old woman's arm, "You'd better show me to the room and get to the hospital."

"Oh!" Emma said happily. "Then, you will stay, Miss Gene?"

"I'll stay, Emma."

The housekeeper was a different person as she briskly turned off the lights and led the way down the long hallway. Soon Gene watched the brown oxfords, worn at the outer edges, going up the stairs ahead of her. Emma's hand clung to the wide, gleaming rail and she had to pause at the first landing but she turned around and smiled at Gene. "It's on the

second floor."

Gene nodded and then went up the rest of the way. A small wall light showed an L-shaped space. There were two doors at the left, both of which were closed. Emma led the way past them and toward the right. The narrow hall was so long it was lost in the shadows.

Emma pointed to four wide doors close together. "These are the cupboards," she whispered, and pointed again, to the right, "That's my room. The Missus's is next."

Gene could not see that door; the light did not reach that far. She stood waiting for Emma to make the next move, but Emma seemed suddenly rooted to the spot where she stood. They both heard a deep groaning. The darkness seemed to gather together to form a white blur, which wavered, then moved toward them.

"Emma!" Gene gasped, and did not recognize the sound of her own strangled cry. She tried to reach out to the housekeeper, but her hands felt paralyzed. Her feet would not move. She could only stare at the misty thing. Her bag slipped from her grasp and fell with a dull thud.

Emma stepped back quickly. She pushed Gene toward the cupboard doors and stood there herself. "Wait!" she said, so low that Gene scarcely heard. "Wait, Miss Gene!"

CHAPTER FIVE

GRIM REPETITION

Nearer and nearer the white figure moved. Gene watched it with a numb, unwilling fascination. When Emma maneuvered into a position ahead of her and reached backward with one hand, touching Gene upon the arm, the girl cried out again. But Emma said softly, "Shush, Miss Gene! It's the Missus."

Gene stepped back. Over Emma's shoulder she saw the wavering figure come forward, step by step. It was, she could presently make out, Harriet Van Allen. The wall lamp was quite some distance behind Gene, and the long nightgown was moving with a ponderous slowness. The sleeves of the gown were long, too, and outstretched as the woman's hands were lifted stiff and straight before her.

Emma repeated, "Shush!" and Gene kept her silence. She had not as yet realized that Harriet Van Allen was walking in her sleep. She gazed at those dark, staring eyes. They seemed to see through the two of them, but Harriet Van Allen did not utter a sound.

Then she reached Emma's door. Her right hand formed a fist and she knocked on the door. "Emma,"

she said flatly. "Emma."

As though the lady were seated at the table and calling for some service, the housekeeper answered, "Yes, Missus. I'm right here."

Gene was leaning back against the cupboard doors by this time. It had come to her that Harriet Van Allen was walking in her sleep. *How silly of me not to have known it before!* she told herself. But it had happened so unexpectedly. Not every day, or rather every night — did Gene witness a scene like this one!

Harriet Van Allen waited, still staring into space. Emma came close to her.

"You wanted something, Missus?"

"My keys, Emma. I must have mislaid them."

"Well, now," Emma said, "we'll have to find them." Her hand was on the lady's rigid arm, and she quietly but firmly led the sleepwalker back the way she had come. When they reached the door, Emma put her hand inside and a flood of light poured out into the hall. Gene saw the knot of hair turn and the housekeeper motioned, "Come on over here."

Gene nodded her understanding. On tiptoe, she followed, but remained at a discreet distance. She saw the two of them, the majestic figure in what she now knew was blue flannel, and the chubby, squat one, moving farther into a room that followed the vast proportions of the Old House. Slowly they walked across the great expanse of rose-figured carpet

Harriet Van Allen Was Walking in Her Sleep

to a four-posted bed. Beside it was a marble-topped table and a low, curved rocker. That was all Gene could see from where she stood.

Wondering, she waited and saw that Emma did nothing about looking for the keys. Her principal concern appeared to be to get her mistress back in bed. When this was accomplished, the little woman stood silent for a moment, and then she said, "Oh, Missus—?"

Harriet Van Allen's head was propped high on several fat pillows, but turned away. When Emma called to her, she moved, and her dark eyes took in the housekeeper briefly, from head to foot.

"What in the world do you want, Emma?"

"Oh, Missus, I just wanted to tell you I'm going to the hospital now."

"Oh, I see." Harriet Van Allen sighed. "I hope he gets along all right!"

"Thank you, Missus. I hope so, too."

Mrs. Van Allen raised herself to a sitting position. Again she sighed. "One thing after another," she murmured, and then, remembering, "Did you call?"

Emma's head bobbed. "I did, and she came." The chubby, veined hand was motioning to Gene in the doorway. "She's right here, ma'am."

Harriet Van Allen did not exactly smile, but the beady eyes gave Gene one of the warmest compliments she had ever received. "That's good," the old lady said. "I like to have somebody in the house.

Sometimes—sometimes I don't hear the phone."

Phone, indeed, Gene thought, but she said, "Oh, I'm sure I'll hear it, Mrs. Van Allen."

"Ummm," said the old lady. "I hope it didn't put you out too much, coming back."

"Not at all," Gene told her, and then the flannel-covered arm raised to dismiss Emma. "You'd better show this young lady her bed and get on to the hospital."

"Oh, yes, Missus." Emma was bobbing again. There was a small lamp on the bedside table and she pulled the cord. "Is there anything you want before I go?"

"Nothing. I'm tired."

Emma was moving backward toward the door. "You must be, Missus. It's late. I'm sorry I disturbed you."

"It's all right, Emma. I told you I wanted to know if she came." Again the beady eyes lighted for Gene. "Pleasant dreams."

Gene said, "Thank you. I hope you have them, too." She was afraid she had said that almost too fervently, but the mistress of the Old House appeared to be completely unaware that the disturbance had all been on her part. Emma snapped the switch.

For just a moment the housekeeper stood there with her back to the door. She looked wordlessly into Gene's face and heaved a quick, deep sigh.

That's how it is, said the sigh.

Gene patted her arm. "Lead the way," she said softly.

They walked together to the next door. Gene saw her bag against the cupboards. While Emma waited, she walked quietly back and picked it up.

"Now, this," Emma said a moment later, throwing open the door, "is my room." Her hand found a wall light.

"Oh," Gene said, looking about. "It's big enough, isn't it?"

"Land sakes, yes. Come right on in, Miss Gene." She motioned to a laundry basket at the left. "I hope you'll excuse this, Miss. You see I iron in here."

Gene had not noticed the basket. She was looking around at what was definitely a cluttered and much-lived-in room. In that first, quick glance, Gene had a sense of hodgepodge, of the mixture of old things to look at, and newer things to use.

Emma was walking toward the dresser, a high, carved piece with small shelves, three on each side of the oval mirror. "Now, you set your bag right on here," she was saying. Her blue eyes went to a tufted chair. "Or maybe you'd rather put it on there?"

"The floor will be fine," Gene said, and because she knew the housekeeper was flustered, she added, "It's certainly nice and warm in here, Emma."

"Isn't it?" Emma beamed upon her electric heater.

"That's why I iron and mend up here. It's not drafty like the kitchen and the cellar." She shivered slightly. "That would never do."

Gene murmured something, and her eyes wandered over the walls, papered in a deep ecru decorated with cream-colored vases overflowing with what looked like pearls. Here and there were darker splotches that looked like water marks. Over the bed, almost a match for the one in Harriet Van Allen's room, was an oval, tinted photograph of a stern-looking man with a bristling mustache.

Emma thought Gene was looking at the bed. She went to it and turned back the thick patchwork quilt, patting the bed. "You see, Miss Gene, it's very comfortable."

"I'm sure it is," Gene agreed.

Beside the bed was a marble-topped table and a small rocker. There was a sewing basket on the table, and over one arm of the chair hung a white woolen sock. Emma picked it up and pushed it into the basket. "I never seem to get my mending done," she murmured.

"I'll bet there's plenty to do here," Gene said, continuing with her appraisal. She saw a fireplace against one wall, and this, too, had small shelves at either side. They were cluttered with pale figurines, a dancing boy and girl, candlesticks, and far too many photographs, most of them in paper folders.

Hands folded before her, Emma murmured,

"That one is my boy." She nodded toward the face of a likable-looking man of middle age, and sighed. "Looks just like his father." Her blue eyes wandered to the door.

"Oh, Emma!" Gene said quickly, "Please don't waste any more time with me. You'd better go now."

"Yes. But I wanted to make sure—"

"Oh, I'll be fine. I'll sleep like a log."

Emma pointed to one corner. There was a marble washstand with two faucets. "The hot one doesn't work," she said.

Gene said, "That won't matter, I'm sure." Still Emma stood there, and Gene knew it was not because she was thinking about the faucet that needed repair.

Emma rubbed her hands together as she said in a low voice, "I just wanted to tell you, Miss Gene, about the Missus."

Gene's eyes flashed wider. "Yes?" she said.

"Well, it's—well, you could see that she was glad you were here, couldn't you?"

Gene felt better. "Yes, I could, Emma."

"And—you see now, how it is. I couldn't have everybody knowing about—about—"

"About Harriet Van Allen's walking in her sleep," Gene cut in. "I understand, Emma." She frowned thoughtfully. "Do you think she might do that again?"

"Tonight? Oh, no. I don't think so. Only once

before, in all these years, has she come twice in one night knocking at my door. She—it usually happens only about every two or three weeks."

"I see." Gene smiled. "Well, I think I'll have a good, sound sleep. So you just run on, Emma."

"I'll do that." Emma's hands went to the white knob on her head. "My hat, now," she said briskly and opened a door near a clothes rack. She motioned to it. "I was going to hang the things there. I should've put that away, but there wasn't much time."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," Gene told her. "I'll turn out the light and I won't know whether the ironing is done or not."

This pleased the housekeeper. "You do that." She smiled and delved into a box. Beyond her stooped figure, Gene could see the interior of another small room which served as a clothes closet. Neatly hung upon racks was a row of cotton dresses. A cedar chest was in there, too, and another spindle-topped dresser.

As Emma brought out a black felt hat, Gene was removing her jacket. The housekeeper went to the mirror over the dresser, saying, "My, that's a pretty suit, Miss Gene."

"Thank you," Gene said. She went to the closet and put the coat on a hanger. "You see, I'm making myself right at home."

"I'm so glad!" Emma had her hat on. "Now, I

won't have to worry. I'm sure everything will be all right." She slipped on a coat.

"I'm sure it will," Gene agreed. She reflected swiftly that the little woman was given to rather wild starts and fears that were really groundless. One minute she had Gene's heart pounding, and the next she had some explanation ready to set things right again. There was a sound in the study—but it was only a loose shutter. There was a ghostly figure in the hall—but it was only Harriet Van Allen walking in her sleep. They were not exactly fears of Emma's conjuring, but in the presence of the bustling little woman, Gene had a sense of seesawing in and out of disaster. She wished the housekeeper would hurry on her way.

I'll go to bed right away, Gene thought. *I'll go to sleep and I won't wake up until it's light. I'll get back to Barbara's before breakfast.* She yawned.

"Bless your heart." Emma smiled upon her. "I'll be going now."

And this time, she went. Gene called softly after her, "I hope everything goes well," and Emma said from the door, "I'm sure it will. I'll be there, anyway."

She was still smiling as Gene closed the door after her and locked it. She stood there a moment listening to the softly retreating footsteps and she thought that Emma was going upon her mission with some pleasure. The little woman probably did not leave

the house very often herself. Certainly it was obvious that she seldom spent a night away from her mistress.

Emma went down the stairs. The small sounds she made drifted into silence. After a time Gene heard a door closing, though not an outer one. Gene guessed that Emma had gone into the kitchen to call her cab.

It was after Gene had slipped into her pajamas and was brushing her hair that she heard the car driving up to the house. She knew it must be at the wider gate. There were two windows on one wall of the room, giving a view of the sleeping town. Gene could not see the car as it bore Emma away to the hospital.

The double windows claimed Gene's attention for a moment. Leaving the mirror, she walked toward them and looked out. This, she knew, must be the back yard of the house, or, rather, the back grounds. The treetops sloped downward, toward the left, and Gene had her first view of the guest house. A square building was set upon a lower mound, lights shone from the windows on the second floor. Evidently the Doddses were still up.

That was good to know. Gene had not let her thoughts dwell upon the fact that she and Harriet Van Allen were now alone in the Old House. She had adjusted her mind to the dimensions of this room alone. The door was locked against the rest

of the mansion. Here was a refuge, a citadel which had guarded the bustling little housekeeper for many years. For one night, it would surely offer quiet and security.

Not consciously did Gene say these things to herself. She had tried to keep from any thinking, going matter-of-factly through the business of hanging up her clothes, turning out the light which Emma had left on. A smaller floor lamp near the rocking chair, Gene left lighted. It was a friendly eye to wink back to the glow that came from the second floor in the guest house. She slipped between the soft sheets and let her arms rest above her head. A sigh of contentment escaped her lips. She had not known how tired she was.

"Ummm," Gene murmured again. Vaguely, she saw the fireplace and all the pictured faces. Most of them were smiling, and Gene was smiling too, as she let herself sink deeper into the soft mattress.

She must have gone to sleep at once. How long she slept she did not know. When she awakened, it was with a sense of great surprise, of absolute incomprehension. If she had gone to sleep thinking Harriet Van Allen might knock at the door, then she might have snapped into a quick understanding of the sound. But she had not thought of such a possibility. Now, when it came, Gene jerked to a sitting position. Her eyes roved unseeingly about the strange room. Her whole being seemed to throb

as the pounding beat upon her ears.

Huskily, Gene said, "Who—who is it?"

She cleared her throat, and would have said again, "Who is it?" but she remembered everything in a burst of clarity. She was in Emma's room, taking Emma's place. Harriet Van Allen was knocking at her door. She had seen how Emma handled this delicate situation, and now it was up to her, Gene, to get up quietly and meet the old lady, then gently lead her back to her own room and to bed.

But Gene did not get up, not right away. She sat there, holding the covers gripped tightly in her two fists and staring at the closed door. It was shiny and dark, like all the other doors in the house. And it was locked!

Suppose it isn't Harriet Van Allen! she thought.

But who else could it be? Emma was gone. There was no one else, no one.

The knock was repeated and a voice said, "Emma!"

It was the lady of the house. In all the years that Emma had been with her, she had repeated her night-walking performance only twice in one evening. But now it was happening again!

"Oh, what shall I *do!*" Gene said fearfully under her breath, even though she did know what was expected of her. She told herself swiftly: *I mustn't lose my head. I've got to take it easy—and think.*

It was the details of the task ahead that worried

her. Just how should she speak to Harriet Van Allen, how firmly must she hold one of those arms that were probably stiff and stretched out as Gene had seen them before?

She called me Emma, Gene reminded herself. *Well, now, I'm Emma.*

It might have been funny, but it was far from that. This was no easy role to play. Once again, Gene heard the voice calling, "Emma!" in a tone that demanded attention, and the knocking was loudly repeated.

"Y-Yes, Missus," Gene managed to say. "I'm coming."

Her own arms felt stiff as she threw back the covers. Her slippers were at the side of the big bed, but she had not brought a robe. Her eyes went quickly to the clothes closet, even though she knew that any robe of Emma's would probably not fit her. Then she saw a sweater over the back of a chair. Gene's feet pushed themselves into the slippers and she sped across the room to grab up the woolen garment.

"Just a minute, Missus," she managed to say, hoping the strange voice would not startle the sleepwalker. Somewhere, Gene seemed to have heard that it was dangerous to waken such a person suddenly. She recalled how calmly Emma had accepted the situation earlier in the evening.

But Emma had had practice. Emma was accus-

tomed to this sort of thing. She was a sort of shadow, almost a second self to Harriet Van Allen.

With numb fingers, Gene found the switch and turned on the wall light as she came to the door. Clumsily she fumbled with the key for a moment and then, drawing in a quick breath, she opened the door.

There stood Harriet Van Allen, much as she had stood before, except that she was staring straight through Gene. Only one hand was out this time—the right one. The left was clutching at the folds of the generous gown, close at the neck.

Gene swallowed. "W-What is it, Missus?" she heard herself saying, and if she had not caught Emma's exact tone and inflection, still it did not sound too much off key.

"I want to go up to third floor," Harriet Van Allen said.

"Third floor!" Gene gasped the words, absolutely out of character, but the mistress of the house appeared not to be startled. She stood statue-still. Only her lips moved.

Presently she spoke. "I'll need the flashlight, Emma. It's in the kitchen alcove, near the window."

For a moment Gene had a wild desire to close the door right in the old lady's face, to blot out those black, staring eyes. *I don't know how to take care of her!* she thought frantically. *I just can't do it!*

Harriet Van Allen said, "Did you hear me, Emma?"

"Oh, y-yes, Missus. I heard you." But did that really mean that she had to go down that long stairway to the kitchen, a vast room which she had only glimpsed from the adjoining dining-room? She didn't even know where to turn on the lights.

What would Emma do now? Would Emma say, "There, there, now," and take that outstretched arm, or would Emma go padding on her way to fetch the flash?

Yes, Gene told herself, Emma would take the lady's arm. First of all, she would lead her back to her room. *Because,* Gene told herself, *even if I do have to go downstairs, I couldn't leave her standing here in the hall. She might try to follow me. She might fall down.* And a fall down that long, steep flight could easily be fatal.

Gene reached for the lady's arm. The feel of the soft cloth, the warmth of the surprisingly firm muscles, made this first step of the uncertain way a great deal easier. This was no ghostly being, Gene was reminded. This was a real flesh-and-blood person, a lady whom she liked and admired.

"There now, Missus," Gene said, beginning to get the feel of her part, "of course, I'll get the flash. You come with me."

Harriet Van Allen gave a grunt, but it was not of displeasure. With a little trouble, Gene eased her

"Do You Hear Me, Emma?"

farther out into the hall. She was grateful to see that Emma had left the wall light on near the head of the stairs. Also, from the lady's open door, there came a glimmer of light. That meant that the lamp at her bedside was still turned on, and this too would help. It would not be so difficult to assist the sleepwalker—or so it seemed at the moment.

Gene grew more confident and repeated, "There now, Missus, of course I'll get the flash."

They walked together down the hall and Gene was grateful for the warmth of Emma's sweater. She thought, *I must hurry and get her back to bed as fast as I can, or she'll take cold.* It was chilly in the hall. Gene wondered what time it was and hoped there would be a clock on that bedside table. As she remembered, there had been several articles near the lamp, but she could not recall what they were.

Through the open door they went, with Gene's right hand holding that outstretched arm, her other hand at the sleepwalker's back. Nearer and nearer was the bed and just as it seemed Mrs. Van Allen would permit herself to be eased into its inviting depths, she paused suddenly.

"No," Harriet Van Allen said. "I'll wait here, Emma." She shook off Gene's protecting hold and turned herself about. Backing up a few steps she came to the rocking chair. It was, upon closer inspection, a strange-looking chair, too high at the back

for its short legs. Harriet Van Allen seated herself. Her knees came up too high, but the folds of the nightgown fell to the floor, covering her bare feet. Her arms were folded across her chest. She stared straight ahead. "I want my flashlight," she said.

Helplessly, Gene looked at the wooden image. *Should I shake her and wake her up?* she thought wildly. *Oh, what would Emma do!* Then she thought, *Emma might be uncertain and bewildered herself, this only happened once in all the time she's known Mrs. Van Allen!*

But the second time there had been a repetition, it had to happen this one night!

Harriet Van Allen said again, "Emma, I want my flash!"

"All right, Missus. I'll get it for you."

"Do that."

"I will." But Gene's eyes roved about the room. It was larger even than Emma's, and not by any means lighted fully by the small table lamp. Over the foot of the bed, Gene saw a robe. She took it and placed it about the rigid shoulders. "There, now," she murmured. "I'll be right back, Missus. You wait for me."

"I'll wait."

Gene looked at her searchingly. She believed that Harriet Van Allen would sit there and wait. She had to believe it.

Swiftly she sped to the door, glancing back only

once. The lady had not moved, and taking heart, Gene stepped into the hall, closing the door after her. She sent one quick glance ahead, and then flew to the stairs.

The wall lamp showed her three switches. Gene pushed each one and lights came to life over her head where the stairs ran on up to the third floor; they glowed near the cupboards from another wall lamp and in the lower corridor.

I'll leave them all on till I get back, Gene told herself. *It — it won't be so bad when I can see!*

With her hand on the broad, smooth railing, she swiftly descended the long flight and did not pause until she had made her first turn to the right. The door was open and she caught the gleam of the white enamel of a stove, the largest Gene had ever seen, and beside it an electric oven. She stepped closer, and almost immediately found the overhead light switch.

She saw an unusual kitchen, a room peculiarly divided, the long, narrow sink in the middle of the room. To the left and right of it ran broad drainboards. Despite the need for haste, Gene could not help standing a moment to look at this arrangement. There was something especially strange and suddenly she realized what it was. The sink was very low, to accommodate Emma, no doubt. Gene looked over it and had no trouble in locating the nook in the alcove.

She went around the sink and found it was balanced on the other side by a table filled with potted plants. But the alcove was her objective. It had one curving wooden seat, comfortably padded in leather of two shades of blue. The linoleum, too, was blue, and spongy-soft underfoot. Gene moved soundlessly toward one of three high windows, their shutters tight. On the sill of one, she saw the blunt handle of the flashlight. She took it, and the feel of the cool metal was somehow comforting, as was the whole immense room. It did not belong to the rest of the house, it was rather in a class with Emma's room, with the ironing-board and the clothes basket. Homey, ordinary things used in everyday life, things that made sense.

With her back to the nook, Gene saw the refrigerator near the stove, and farther along the pale-blue wall, the broad desk with the telephone. She thought suddenly, *Emma must like this kitchen.*

Still she didn't iron and mend here. It was chilly in the high ceilinged room. Gene felt the cool air striking against her bare ankles. She shot a quick look toward the three windows and then observed, for the first time, the little white clock.

It was midnight.

"Oh!" Gene heard her own quick gasp, she did not reason why, but there seemed suddenly to be something sinister in the very hour. She glanced toward the adjoining dining-room, and then the full

remembrance returned: *I am in the Old House!*

Gene had spent but a few minutes downstairs alone, but it seemed that she had been away from Mrs. Van Allen for a long time, too long a time. *Hurry!* ran her frenzied thought. *Hurry back up there to her.*

She turned to go back through the door to the hall and it was then she saw the other door. This must be at the back of the house, leading outside and to the cellar. At that door, in that instant, there came a muted knocking.

As stiff as the lady of the house in her sleepwalking trance, Gene stood rooted to the spot, staring at the square panels. Her lips moved, but she made no sound.

The knocking came again, softly.

"Who is it?" Gene cried. "Who's there?"

"It's Zella Dodds."

Zella Dodds, from the guest house, where the lights twinkled back warmly! Gene's knees felt weak with relief. She ran to the door and opened it. There was a small pantry and another door. This was bolted and Gene's fingers tore at the shining round knob. There was a small button to press and she managed that. Then the outer door was open and Zella Dodds stood there smiling.

"I saw all the light," she began, "and I wondered if — ?"

"Oh, come in!" Gene exclaimed. "I'm so glad to

see you!"

"That's good. I thought maybe — " but Gene's hand was on her arm, and Gene was saying, "Listen!"

Zella Dodds said, "Mrs. Van Allen?"

"Yes." Gene nodded quickly. "Come in quickly, and lock the door, will you? Come on upstairs and—" And what? See that Harriet Van Allen was in a sleep-walking trance?

No, Gene quickly decided. Much as she appreciated the presence of the lady, she must not reveal Harriet Van Allen's unfortunate ailment.

"No," Gene contradicted herself. "Wait for me on the first landing, will you? And be sure to lock the door!"

The newcomer murmured a quick reply and Gene raced for the stairs. Why had she taken so long? she berated herself. From the sound of the old lady's voice, it had seemed that she was standing at the head of the stairs.

She was. Again, she called out, "Emma! Where are you?"

Gene had a quick and horrible vision of her coming to the stairs, stepping down, perhaps catching her foot in the folds of the long gown, and falling.

She called out, "Oh, wait, Missus — please wait right there!"

Gene was still calling, still running up when she heard the crashing sound from overhead. *I'm too late!* she thought wildly. *Oh, I'm too late!*

CHAPTER SIX

FRESH FEAR

Gene's feet were leaden weights as she forced her way up the second flight. Upon reaching the landing, she saw an overturned chair, and Harriet Van Allen standing there, looking at it dazedly.

"I — don't understand," the mistress of the Old House said.

Gene breathed, "Oh, Missus, it was only a chair!"

"Only a chair," Harriet Van Allen repeated dully. One hand brushed over her forehead. The old fingers moved limply, with an effort.

Gene knew then that she was truly awake — out of her sleepwalking trance. There was no need to keep up the pretense of Emma's speech. Perhaps there was no need to hand over the flashlight. Harriet Van Allen no longer moved in a dream wherein it had seemed urgent to open the locked rooms on the third floor.

For that, Gene was truly grateful, and for a number of other reasons. Harriet Van Allen smiled faintly at her, saying, "I thought there was a light downstairs, Gene."

"There was, Mrs. Van Allen," Gene told her gently, and her free hand went easily and with real

affection to the old lady's arm. "I — well, I guess it was because I was in a strange bed, but I woke up all of a sudden. I just thought I'd go downstairs and raid the icebox."

It sounded weak, but the old lady accepted it well enough. "Oh, I'm glad you made yourself at home, my dear."

"I did." Gene smiled, and without too much emphasis eased the old lady back down the hall. She thought about Zella Dodds, marooned in the kitchen. Quickly she said, "There's a glass of milk I didn't quite finish. I'll go down and then turn off the lights."

Harriet Van Allen was not concerned about the lights. Perhaps she was puzzling over her own presence there at the head of the stairs, realizing that she had been walking in her sleep, and worrying about it. Gene sensed the thought and tried to dispel it. "I'm sorry I woke you up, Mrs. Van Allen."

"Oh, that's all right." She looked closely into the girl's face, seemed satisfied, and then noticed the flashlight.

Gene laughed guiltily. "I helped myself. I wasn't sure if I knew where the lights were." She could tell that the old lady remembered nothing about asking for it. Gene managed another chuckle. "I guess you'll be glad to have Emma back, Mrs. Van Allen. She probably goes to sleep and stays asleep."

It all seemed rather unconvincing, but Gene

wanted to reassure the old lady that she had done nothing unusual. And Gene thought she had succeeded.

"I like to have you here," Harriet Van Allen said. She seemed to see Emma's sweater for the first time. "Are you chilly, my dear?" she asked.

"Oh, no!" Gene assured her.

They had passed Emma's room and were close to Harriet Van Allen's. The old lady said as they went in, "You run on now and drink your milk. I can put myself to bed."

"All right." Gene remained in the hall. "I won't bother you again." Perhaps that was pushing the idea too far. Harriet Van Allen searched her face for a moment. "You aren't bothering me," she said, and added in such a straightforward tone that Gene flushed, "You're a fine little girl, Gene. I like you."

The evening before, when Gene had met the mistress of the Old House in her rustling dress and fur cape, she would have doubted that she could ever feel a great tenderness for the old lady. The ensuing hours had been crammed so full of strange happenings, that it seemed to Gene she had known Harriet Van Allen for ever so long — and loved her.

Impulsively, Gene lifted her arms. The wide woolen sleeves of Emma's sweater fell about the old lady's shoulders, as, sweetly, Gene implanted a kiss upon the smooth old cheek.

"Sleep tight!" Gene smiled mistily, and with the

memory of the startled but pleased expression in those black eyes, she closed the door.

She did not go immediately back to the stairs, where Zella Dodds stood waiting, and, probably, wondering about the happenings overhead. Gene waited until she was sure that Harriet Van Allen had returned to her bed, and then, on tiptoe, she made her way back down to the landing.

Zella Dodds, sitting on one of the steps, looked up quickly, a hundred questions in her slanting eyes. Gene did not want to talk to her, so she motioned: *Come,* and Zella stood up. Together they went back to the kitchen.

"Well — ?" the slant-eyed lady questioned.

For a moment Gene did not answer, then she said in a low voice, "Sit over there in the nook."

Zella Dodds lowered her voice. "All right."

Gene crossed the room to the refrigerator. She opened the door, saw that it was well stocked, and then closed it again, in case Mrs. Van Allen might be listening. Gene could not recall whether she had said she wanted some milk or had already taken it. The loud closing of the door would suggest the raid anyhow and give her an excuse to loiter here with her caller.

Going toward the nook, where Zella Dodds had seated herself, Gene slipped in beside her on the leather seat. "How did you happen to come over, Mrs. Dodds?"

"Zella, please," she corrected, smiling.

"Zella," Gene said. She noticed that the lady wore a baggy, nondescript coat, but the same green skirt that she had worn previously with her suit. A little of her plain, tailored blouse showed. She was hatless, and the molded gold of her long hair was smooth and unrumpled. Yet she gave the impression of having dressed hastily to go out.

If Gene was taking a moment to observe what she wore, Zella Dodds was doing the same. One of the slanting brows lifted slightly as she eyed the baggy sleeves of Emma's jacket.

Gene caught the look, and smiled. "I borrowed it from Emma."

Zella Dodds nodded, and Gene waited for the explanation. The lady said, as though there had been no interruption, "Why did I come over? Because I saw all your lights blazing. I thought maybe you were having some trouble."

Gene said, "Oh, were you still up?"

"Reading. I usually turn in at one."

With only half her mind, Gene caught that. She was puzzling over the implication of Mrs. Dodds's being here on guard this night. Then she heard Zella Dodds saying, "I gathered you might be in deep water, Miss Tierney."

"Deep water," Gene repeated, and smiled. Harriet Van Allen was safely tucked in her bed, and there was a friendly person to sit with her here in the vast

kitchen. Gene's hand went over her curls. "That high!" she said. "But skip the Miss Tierney."

"Um," Zella Dodds said. "Well, here's how it was. I met Emma as she was leaving. I was out for a little walk. It turned out to be a long walk. This is an immense place, really."

"I know," Gene nodded. "Then, Emma told you I was here?"

The golden head bowed slightly. "She said Miss Gene had come to stay with the 'Missus.' Frankly, I was astonished. I thought you were visiting at the Ainslees', that you had just arrived."

"That's right," Gene agreed. "But Mr. Ainslee was taken ill, and then Emma called and seemed to need help." Gene shrugged. "So — "

Zella Dodds nodded. "That was very kind of you." The narrow eyes grew narrower. "So Mr. Ainslee was taken ill. Was it — sudden?"

Gene thought swiftly, *Zella Dodds knows about that sign business. She's probably keyed up with the thing, too. If I let on I think there's anything to it, maybe it might make her decide to leave. And the book means so much to Mrs. Van Allen.*

Aloud, in a rush she said, "Oh, Mr. Ainslee's been in bad health for a long time. He had to quit his practice and get outdoors. He spends most of his time on his turkey farm."

"That's right," Zella Dodds murmured. "I remember Mrs. Van Allen saying something about it."

She sighed lightly and her eyes roved the kitchen walls.

"Oh, nothing like that," Gene shook her head, and laughed uncertainly to hide what she had practically admitted — that it was something else that had been disturbing. "I — I had a kind of nightmare," she went on, and that was true enough. "I couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd come downstairs. To make sure of enough light I pushed all the switches."

"I see." Gene was a little afraid she saw too well that this was not the whole truth. The green eyes moved toward the stairs. "I don't mean to be too curious, but did Mrs. Van Allen take a tumble?"

"A tumble?" Gene repeated. "Oh, no — she just bumped into a chair. I think she must have come out of her room so quickly the — the lights blinded her and she bumped into the chair. It — it was nothing to worry about." Gene drew a deep breath.

"That's good. I was concerned about her. Perhaps Emma told you what she said to us this evening?"

Gene frowned. "I — don't exactly remember — " Nor did she. Too much had happened in a short time, and it was a strain to cover up the most recent incident with Harriet Van Allen. Zella Dodds was not proving such a bolster right now. She knew Gene was telling only half-truths, and a few white fibs, and Gene knew that she knew.

Zella Dodds said, "Mrs. Van Allen was really over-

wrought. That unseen clock, you know."

Gene nodded.

"She said," Zella Dodds went on, "that if such a thing happened again, there would be no book. That she would sell all of her things. So — " the long, red-tipped fingers spread — "we wouldn't do the book."

"Oh, but she wants it so much!" Gene said swiftly. "Emma did tell me something about that, but Emma said, too, that she thought it was such a good thing to have you people here. I — I guess Mrs. Van Allen had let herself get — well, in a sort of rut." That did not sound as Gene meant it to, and she went on in a rush, "She's really a dear and I do like her so much. It seems I've known her for ages! And about her—her treasures, well, I guess they're pretty important, aren't they? I haven't seen the whole house, but from what I have seen, I'd say there were some very valuable pieces."

"There are," Zella Dodds admitted. "But,"—there was the light gesture of surrender again — "we'll have to do as she says."

"You just wait until tomorrow," Gene prophesied warmly. "Things'll be a lot better then, I'm sure. She was upset tonight, and that makes a big difference, you know."

"Um-hum." The green eyes touched upon the desk with the telephone, came around to the windows and then went to the back door. "Well, my dear, if all's well here, perhaps I'd better be getting

back."

Gene thought, *And in case Mrs. Van Allen is still awake, I'd better be getting back upstairs, too.* So she did not ask her visitor to stay longer, but her gratitude for the kindness that had prompted her coming made Gene say gratefully, "Thanks a lot, Zella, for keeping an eye on things. I — I was awfully glad you came."

Zella Dodds smiled. "To tell you the truth, my dear, you looked like a ghost when you let me in." She had slipped out of the nook and was standing still, but not looking directly at Gene, and Gene was glad of it. Indeed, she must have looked like a ghost when she had opened the door. Harriet Van Allen was in her sleepwalking trance then.

The flashlight. It lay there on the table as a reminder of how frightened Gene had been. Gene thought, *I don't even remember bringing it back down with me. Gracious, I must be more tired than I realized!* She drew inspiration from that idea. She said to Zella Dodds, "I — I was tired, I guess."

"Tired?" Zella Dodds said lightly. "Yes, one can be, after waking from a nightmare."

But that was not true. One wasn't tired after a nightmare — one was too alert, too tense to know weariness. And she had told Zella she had wakened because of a nightmare!

I'm just no good at making up excuses, Gene said to herself. *I wish I could tell her the whole truth.*

It's nothing disgraceful if people walk in their sleep. Nor was it, and yet Gene felt that Harriet Van Allen must be protected in her weakness. And it might make a difference, somehow, with the book. Why Gene thought this, she did not know, but she did not want to say anything that might send the Doddses away from the Old House. She believed, with Emma, that they would be good for Harriet Van Allen.

So Gene took advantage of the chilly air. She drew the sweater closer about her. "Isn't it getting cold?" she said.

Zella Dodds agreed that it was. "It'll freeze again tonight," she predicted. "But you run on up and hop into your bed. I think you'll sleep now, don't you?"

"Oh, yes," Gene said fervently.

Zella Dodds moved toward the back door. "You know, the iron fence goes around the guest house, too. You haven't a thing to worry about."

"Is that right?" Gene said, and tried to picture those high, iron spikes running down to the second slope.

Zella Dodds smiled. "We're closed in tight for the night, all of us. The gate operates from the house, Emma said."

"But I thought — " Gene puzzled.

"I met her when she was on the outside, waiting for her cab. I was inside."

"I see." Gene nodded. She smiled. "Well, it's a

good thing to know you're locked up among friends."

"Isn't it, though? If you should want help — "

"I won't," Gene said positively. "I'm sure everything will be fine."

Scarcely had the words left her lips, when, from the upper floor, came Harriet Van Allen's voice, piercing, shrill:

"Gene!"

Gene snapped to rigid attention. "Yes, Mrs. Van Allen. What is it?"

"Who's down there with you? I thought I heard voices."

Gene and Zella Dodds exchanged a quick look. It was the green-eyed lady who answered. "You did hear voices — this is Mrs. Dodds."

"Oh, Mrs. Dodds." The old lady spoke with such relief that Gene came to a swift decision.

"Come on up with me," she whispered and Zella Dodds said as quietly, "Of course."

As they neared the head of the stairs, they saw Harriet Van Allen leaning against the railing. Zella Dodds moved in the lead and she explained as she came to the old lady, "I was out for a little walk; I'm quite a nighthawk, really, and I saw the light over here, and I dropped in and had a word with Gene."

"That's — fine." Harriet Van Allen drew a deep breath. "I wondered who was down there."

Gene had reached her side. "I'm sorry if we dis-

"I Wondered Who Was Down There."

turbed you. It's all my fault for ordering the wrong kind of a dream."

The slim old hand went to Gene's shoulder. "Dreams, my dear, are one of the things we don't order. We — we take what we get." She drew her brows together. "There's going to be a change in the weather," she said, and breathed deeply. "I just got another twinge."

"Oh, you're taking a cold!" Gene said quickly. "And you haven't got your robe on. You'd better hurry back to bed."

Harriet Van Allen sighed. "Yes," she said, and to Zella Dodds: "I'm getting old."

Mrs. Dodds did not accept that. She murmured something about age and that it was the way one thought and felt rather than the number of years. Gene was paying scant attention. Mrs. Van Allen was leaning heavily upon her arm for support and Gene well knew how dreadfully tired she must be. She was exhausted mentally and physically. The evening before had been filled with terror, and her rest had been broken twice with sleepwalking. Now, she was again awake, and in pain.

I'll get her to bed and sit by her until she does go to sleep, Gene thought. The weariness that stole through her own young muscles was forgotten.

They walked down the hall, and it did not seem strange that Zella Dodds should go right along. When they came to Mrs. Van Allen's room, and Zella went

in ahead, that seemed all right, too. She had a friendly way about her, a knowing way, as though she had more than once assisted someone who was old or ill. In Zella Dodds, too, Gene reflected, there had been something of a change — or perhaps her first impression of the tall lady had been erroneous. In her smart coat and hat, Mrs. Dodds had appeared much more aloof than she did now.

Zella Dodds was standing at the side of the bed. The covers were turned down neatly and she was saying, "You have some lovely things in here, Mrs. Van Allen. Show me around tomorrow morning, won't you?"

That, probably, was the best thing she could have said. She was implying that the work on the book would surely go on, taking Mrs. Van Allen's mind off her worries and pains.

The old lady was smiling as she got back into bed.

Gene watched her, grateful for the happy expectation in her dark old eyes. She was not concerned with the treasures in the room, though she knew there were the large fireplace, tables, chairs, and, of course, those delicate statues and pictures. Zella Dodds understood these things much better, and could appreciate them much more. Gene felt suddenly glad that after she left the Doddses would be there to take up Mrs. Van Allen's time and interest.

Goodness! Gene said to herself. *Here I go wondering how she'll be after I leave! I'd better take*

care of her right now and see that she gets some sleep!

The truth was that, for a moment, Gene had had a queer little pang. She knew that she would often think of this strange old lady, wonder about her, and hope fervently that all would be well.

Harriet Van Allen turned suddenly to Gene. "Would you please bring me a drink, Gene?" She motioned to the corner of the room at the left. "There's a glass over there."

The glass was on the marble washstand and Gene hastened about her small task. She heard Zella Dodds saying, "Let me fix that pillow for you, Mrs. Van Allen."

The old lady made sounds of contentment, but Gene did not catch the words because she had turned on the water. It came with an unexpected force, which held her immediate attention, so that when the old lady gave a sudden cry of alarm Gene turned swiftly. The water was still running and she almost dropped the glass.

She said, "What is it, Mrs. Van Allen? What's the matter?"

The old lady was sitting bolt upright in bed. Her hands were in back of her. She was staring at the ceiling.

"Oh, Mrs. Van Allen!" Gene cried. She heard Zella Dodds's voice, too, filled with deep concern.

But the old lady did not speak. It seemed she tried to but could not. She just sat there, staring upward.

Gene realized that she had left the water running. She turned quickly, filled the glass, and pushed down the silver handle. Bringing the glass to the side of the bed, she placed it quickly upon the table. Her arms went about the rigid shoulders and she looked over at Zella Dodds on the opposite side of the bed. "What is it," she asked. "Do you know?"

"I can't imagine!" that lady said. She seated herself at the edge of the bed so that the old lady had to look at her. "Tell us, Mrs. Van Allen," she said quietly. "Are you ill?"

The beady black eyes seemed to recede into black hollows. Harriet Van Allen looked at Zella Dodds, but did not see her. A moan came from her bloodless lips.

Gene still held her. Keeping her arms upon the old lady's shoulders, she bent closer. "Please, Mrs. Van Allen, please tell us what happened? Are you sick?" Gene did not sound calm. Her voice was vibrant with her affection and concern. "Oh, please, do you want a doctor?"

Harriet Van Allen looked at her then. "A doctor?" she said, and shook her head *No*. One of her hands went over Gene's. "Listen," she said in a hoarse whisper. "Listen!"

Gene sent one puzzled glance toward Zella Dodds, who shook her head.

They waited in silence, because that was what Harriet Van Allen wanted them to do.

Finally, Gene said, "I don't hear anything."

Harriet Van Allen's hands came up to clutch at the folds of the gown about her throat. "You don't hear anything," she said, as though in some kind of trance. "No, and — I don't hear anything — now. But I — I did hear it."

Gene began to tremble. It was that unreal and terrifying sensation she had felt before. This was the feeling of unseen eyes upon her, of unseen hands reaching out. She shook herself, shook away the wild thoughts that raced through her mind. She made herself say, "What did you hear?"

But even then, she knew. Harriet Van Allen's lips moved carefully and the words came as though she had to force each unwilling syllable.

"I heard — the ticking — of the clock."

There was a brief silence.

Zella Dodds gave a sigh. "But — there is no clock in your room, Mrs. Van Allen."

Harriet Van Allen looked at her. She said dully, "I know there is no clock in my room. It's downstairs in the kitchen. The kitchen clock isn't working. We needed a clock there."

It was like some soulless chant, absolutely without expression. Gene could not bear it, this hateful, stunned suffering. Her voice came hotly, protesting: "I think you're mistaken, Mrs. Van Allen. I didn't hear any clock ticking."

The old lady said flatly, "You were over there,

turning on the water."

"But when I came back here I didn't hear it, either!" Gene looked up at Zella Dodds. "You were here. Did you hear it?"

The golden head shook back and forth. "No, I didn't. I think Gene's right — that you're mistaken, Mrs. Van Allen."

That other time, Gene thought, when they were all together in the amusement room, they had all heard the ticking of the unseen clock, each and every one of them.

Then, however, the room had been quiet. This time, the water had been splashing out of the faucet. Even so, Zella Dodds had been right here, and she had heard nothing of the sound.

Zella Dodds said, "I think you're overtired, Mrs. Van Allen. Have you any medicine you could take, so you could relax?"

That was sensible, and Gene thought again that it would be a shame if the book idea were to be given up. More than ever, she felt that Mrs. Van Allen needed that new interest. Perhaps if Zella Dodds were to see any more scenes like this one she would pack up and leave.

I've got to make her think about something else, Gene said to herself. *I've just got to fix things up so she won't be so horribly afraid, and so Zella won't give up the job.* She pushed back her hair and tried to think, but her mind whirled. She felt absolutely

helpless.

It was Zella Dodds who insisted gently, "You must have some kind of sleeping medicine, haven't you, Mrs. Van Allen?"

The old lady shook her head. "No, I haven't. I very seldom take any kind of medicine."

Then Gene caught her breath. "Well, maybe you won't need any, then." Her hand went to the table and brought the glass of water to the lady's notice. "Here's your drink," she said, "or would you rather I'd run down and warm you some milk?"

"No, thank you." She took the glass, and drank a little.

"You know," Gene pointed out, "you have a busy day ahead of you tomorrow, Mrs. Van Allen. I've only seen a little of your wonderful house, but if you're going to have a book about all of it — well, you'd better get some rest."

It sounded childish even in her own ears, like promising a youngster a treat under his pillow, but it seemed to work. Handing the glass to Gene, Harriet Van Allen looked up at Zella Dodds.

"That's right," she said. "We have a lot to do."

Zella Dodds nodded agreement. "We certainly have. I think I'll run along now, and let you get to sleep. I'm sure you will, too."

Gene doubted that, but she was grateful just the same. The staring, blank look had gone from Harriet Van Allen's face and she was leaning back

against her pillows.

"Perhaps I will," she agreed. "You go now — and I'll see you in the morning."

Zella Dodds's red mouth spread in a smile. "You'll see me all day — and Bertram, too."

Gene said, "Oh, goodness! He's probably wondering where you are, Zella!"

"He knows where I am." Her fingers covered her mouth lightly but the yawn showed behind them. "He's sound asleep by now and — " the yawn grew — "I'm going to sleep, too."

Yawns were catching things. Gene knew again how sleepy she was. With Zella Dodds she moved toward the door, but turned to say to the old lady, "If there's anything you want, you call me, won't you?"

"I hate to say it, my dear," Harriet Van Allen spoke reluctantly, "but would you bring me my — my clock from the kitchen — and the flashlight?"

"Why, certainly I will. I'll be right back with them."

Zella Dodds said from the door, "I'll see you in the morning, Mrs. Van Allen. Pleasant dreams."

"Thank you," the old lady said. "The same to you."

And then Gene and Zella went out into the hall and down the stairs.

They did not speak until they were in the kitchen.

Gene said, "Thanks — ever so much."

"For what?" Zella Dodds shrugged.

"For a lot of things," Gene said earnestly. And then, on an impulse, "You will stay, won't you?"

"Stay — ?"

"I mean, not go away, because of what happened. I mean, you'll finish the book, won't you?"

"Oh, I thought you meant you were worried about tonight."

"No, I think everything will be all right tonight."

Zella Dodds patted her arm. "I think so, too, Gene. You just go to bed and get a good rest."

"But about the book?"

"Don't worry about the book."

Gene smiled. "It means so much to her. It's — it's awful to be worried about things that aren't real."

"It certainly is," Zella Dodds agreed. "But that's what most people worry about — the things that aren't real — isn't it?"

Gene blinked. She felt so tired. "I guess so," she agreed.

Zella Dodds laughed lightly and gave her a little push. "Get those things for her now and hurry to bed. I am positively leaving this minute. See you in the morning."

Gene said, "Um-hum." After Zella Dodds went out the door, she pushed the bolt back in place. She thought to herself, *It was certainly a good thing Zella came tonight.*

The inner door was shut — now for the flash and

the clock. Seeing the time, one o'clock, brought another yawn.

"Ho-hum," she said aloud, and it was somehow a good exit line for leaving the big kitchen. Worries and fears, if any, would be left on the first floor. Gene was going to her room and to sleep.

She heard Harriet Van Allen calling: "Gene — ?"

"Coming!" Gene answered almost gaily. She hurried into the old lady's room and held out the two articles.

"It's one o'clock!" she said. "It isn't tonight anymore — it's tomorrow!"

Harriet Van Allen smiled as she motioned to the table. "Put it there, child, and the flashlight, too."

Gene did as she was told. "There," she said. "Now, is there anything more I can do for you?"

"You've done too much already."

"Oh, no, I haven't, Mrs. Van Allen."

"Humm. We won't argue it." She sighed deeply, leaning back on her pillows. Her dark eyes went to the clock. "I think — listening to a real ticking will be a good idea."

"I do, too," Gene agreed. "I honestly and truly think a clock is a kind of cozy thing." Harriet Van Allen turned away and Gene said to herself, *I've made another mistake, I guess!*

Perhaps Harriet Van Allen sensed her dismay, for she faced Gene again and said kindly, "Don't get up early, Gene."

Gene nodded. "Nor you, either," she said. "G'night." She thought, *I'll get out of here quickly, before I blunder again,* and moved toward the door. "Call me if you want me, won't you?"

Harriet Van Allen lifted one hand in gentle dismissal of the idea. Gene carried the recollection of her face with her as she returned to Emma's room. Harriet Van Allen had seemed quite at peace with her world.

Gene had left the light on in the hall, and also the small lamp at her own bedside. She had not locked the door. That had taken some manipulation of will power, but Gene had argued with herself, "What if she should need me? And not be able to come and call me?"

Gene hoped Barbara was sleeping soundly. She thought, *I'm so glad Barby stayed at home.*

This was her last conscious thought. She could not know when the dream of Barbara came, but in it she saw her friend falling into the lake. It was near the outdoor theater, where Barbara had taken her pupils for a picnic. Someone was pushing Barbara, someone Gene could not see, and Barbara was falling, falling.

"I need your help!" Barbara was crying. "Help me!"

Only it was not Barbara. It was Harriet Van Allen. She was standing beside Gene's bed and saying, "I need your help, Gene. Help me!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

PRECIOUS TREASURE

It took Gene a long moment to regain her senses. She had been steeped in a nightmare dream which had abruptly given way to startling reality. Vaguely, from some corner of her mind, there came a rebellious thought: *I was supposed to sleep late. But it isn't even morning — it's still dark.*

The bedside lamp glowed softly, and in its radiance Mrs. Van Allen went suddenly limp. Her hands reached out and over the bed. With a low moan, she fell to her knees.

"Oh, Mrs. Van Allen!" Gene was completely alert now. She leaped from the bed. Something dreadful must have happened — something very real, because the lady was not sleepwalking this time. She had called Gene by her own name, called to her for help. Gene said, "What is it? Tell me!"

And then Gene saw the rip in the left sleeve of the gown and the red stain on the arm, just below on the elbow. Gene's hand went to her mouth. "Oh! You're hurt!"

It was not difficult to help her to her feet, and then to the bed. Harriet Van Allen kept murmuring, "It's nothing — the cut is nothing."

She did not want Gene to get any medication for it. Nor did she want a drink of water. "There's only one thing I want." Harriet Van Allen spoke gaspingly, one hand over her heart. "Listen carefully, Gene, I think I'm going to—"

"Oh, no!" Gene pleaded. Harriet Van Allen shook her head. "It—doesn't matter. But—there's something I want. Something I want you to do for me."

Gene had pushed the pillows high at the old lady's back. She seated herself at the side of the bed and took one of the cold hands in both her own. "What is it? What can I do? I'll do whatever you want."

Harriet Van Allen closed her eyes a moment. "I knew — you'd say that," she said chokingly. "I know — I can trust you."

"Just tell me!"

Harriet Van Allen opened her eyes. She looked for a startled moment at Gene, and then beyond her, toward the door. She said, alarmed; "My keys. I brought them with me, and now — " Her empty hands opened and closed.

Gene rose to her feet swiftly. "I'll find them for you. Don't worry, please." Her eyes studied the floor. Almost at once she was rewarded. She bent down and picked up the black ribbon; the keys jangled as she handed them to their owner.

"That's — good." Harriet Van Allen nodded. She paused as though to gain strength and then, as if

speaking over a terrific weight in her chest, she said, "I tried to go up there, but I couldn't. The — nightgown. I — stumbled and fell against the lampbase. It — shouldn't be there. It's sharp."

Gene tried to make sense of this, but it took her a moment to ask the question: "Where were you trying to go?"

The black head motioned to the left. "Up there — to the third floor." She moistened her lips and gave another startled look. "The flashlight?" she asked. "Is it here?" She sat up and searched in the folds of the rumpled comforter.

Gene said, "Wait, I'll look for it. I'll find it for you."

"I'm — sure I brought it back with me."

Gene found the flashlight. "Here it is. I'll put it on the table."

Harriet Van Allen nodded. "But be careful it doesn't fall. You'll need it."

Need it for what? ran Gene's wondering thought. *What in the world was she trying to do? And what does she want me to do now?*

She managed to stifle her fears, and said, "I'll be careful of it."

The old lady watched as she set it upon the table. Her hands moved over the keys, but she was not looking at them. She was looking at Gene. She said, as Gene came back to the bedside, "My most precious treasure is not an antique, Gene, not a jewel. It is

something I have hidden — something valuable to me alone, and now that I feel — "

Gene shook her head.

The old lady did not finish her thought. She said instead, "It is in the cupola. I want you to get it for me."

Gene gasped. "In — the cupola?"

"Yes." Then, because Gene's face showed such blank amazement, "You know, the tower at the top of the house."

Gene knew: that tall, square spire that ran high into the clouds. She said haltingly, "I — thought you meant the third floor."

Harriet Van Allen nodded. "That comes first. You go to the third floor, the second door on the left of the hall. That leads to the storerooms. The cupola is up above that."

Gene could well believe that it was up above that. As though from a distance she heard the old lady's halting voice above the turmoil of her thoughts: "There is no light on the cupola stairs or in the cupola room. That is why you'll need the flashlight."

All Gene could say was: "Oh, I see."

Harriet Van Allen drew a deep breath. "I — planned to go myself. That was why I wanted the light ready. I planned to go at four o'clock."

There was something of consolation at the mention of four o'clock. Four o'clock was the beginning of the morning, the ending of the night, with all its

frightening interruptions. Gene said, "Is it — four now?"

"No. I — I couldn't wait. I went up about two-thirty. It must be three now."

Three o'clock! Only three o'clock in the morning. And the mistress of the Old House wanted Gene to go up in the cupola where there were no lights, and bring down something that was her greatest treasure.

Gene said to herself, *I don't see how I can do it. I just don't!* And fast on that thought came another, fraught with rebellion. *And I don't see why I should do it! Or why it's so important — now! Why can't I go up after awhile when it's light?*

Harriet Van Allen seemed to have read her thought. "I wouldn't ask you if I didn't know what I know. But the morning will be — too late!"

"Oh, please, don't say that!"

"It's — true." She reached for Gene's hand. "Will you go and get the box for me, Gene? It's a small box, in an old trunk. The trunk is not locked. You won't have any trouble finding it. The cupola room is not large."

A small box in an old trunk. And the cupola room was not large, but it was probably at the top of a long flight of stairs. It must be. Gene said to herself again, *If only she could wait!*

"Please, Gene." Harriet Van Allen pressed her fingers. "I — need it now."

Gene said, "All right, I'll get it for you."

A sob came from the woman's lips. "Oh, thank you."

It was only a murmur, but so heartfelt that Gene silently upbraided herself.

Why didn't I tell her I'd go right away? she thought. *Why did I make her talk so much and beg me? Maybe — maybe it's true!*

Indeed, at that moment the mistress of the Old House looked desperately ill. She was leaning against the pillows; the hollows under her closed eyes were deep, her face thin and drawn.

Gene thought, *I hate to leave her here all alone. I'll have to hurry!* Aloud she said, "Mrs. Van Allen, I think you'd better stay right here until I get back. Will you promise me to do that?"

"But this — " the dark eyes opened, "this is Emma's bed." She appeared to be aware of this fact for the first time.

It was Emma's bed, and Gene's bed, now occupied by the lady of the house. A foolish, giddy thought held Gene for a moment. Beds in this house were only to jump in and out of. In you went, out you came. She thought, *Out go you, Gene!* She quickly shook her head, saying, "If you don't promise to stay right here, I won't go."

Harriet Van Allen nodded weakly. "I'll stay here." And Gene believed beyond a doubt that she surely would. She had not the strength to get back to her own room alone and unaided. Gene looked again

"You Better Stay Right Here."

at the torn sleeve. It seemed that there was no need to worry on that score. The hurt had not been serious.

Suddenly the lady said, "You know where to go?"

"Yes, you told me. To the third floor, the second door on the left."

"That's right. Go straight through the storerooms. There is only one other door and that's the cupola."

Gene nodded. She felt numb, as though she were now the sleepwalker. There was a strange humming sound in her ears. With a jerking motion she put out her hand. "I'd better take the keys, then."

Harriet Van Allen did not hand them over to her, she simply relaxed her hold and let Gene take them. Gene said to herself, *Yes, I'm sure she'll stay here.* Before the old lady could exhaust herself further Gene said, "I'll take the flashlight now and go right up." She almost snatched at it. "And — I'll be right back. At least — it shouldn't take very long."

"No." The word came faintly. "It won't take — long. God bless you, Gene!"

Gene thought wildly, *Oh, she is dreadfully ill!* But there was something else she had to know. She said, over the loud pounding of her heart, "But I don't know which keys to use. There are so many."

"Oh, yes." The fingers of her left hand opened, and Gene put the keys in them. Both hands fumbled with the black cord. Harriet Van Allen did not need to bend her head to watch her movements. She

knew by touch which were the two keys that Gene would need.

"This one," she said in a whisper, separating a long bronze key, "and this." The latter was silvery and squat.

Gene took them, holding them free of the others. She said, "I'll hurry. Try to have a little nap."

"Yes," Harriet Van Allen murmured. "Hurry, Gene."

Holding the two keys pressed together in her left hand, the flashlight in her right, Gene sped on her way. At the door, she tucked the light under her arm, took one last look at the quiet figure on the bed and softly closed the door. Then she ran toward the stairway.

I won't need the flashlight going up, she thought. *I can turn on the hall light from here.*

No, she must not, she decided upon the instant. If the Doddses happened to be awake, and happened to look over toward the house, Zella might think she were needed again. In a sense, she certainly was. Gene would have given a great deal for companionship upon this uncertain venture, but she felt sure that Harriet Van Allen would not want an outsider to open the trunk, to bring back the precious box. The thought never occurred to Gene that she herself was most certainly an outsider. She now felt more than ever that she was a part of the terror that stalked the Old House.

Terrified she most certainly was, though she sought valiantly to overcome that hateful pounding of her heart. She talked aloud to herself, quietly but with a forced determination. "I won't light the hall lights. I'll just use the flash. It's not so far. It won't take so very long. Pretty soon I'll be coming down again."

Her feet were moving up the first flight of steps, the first of the third flight, really, and Gene came to the landing there before she realized that she had neglected to slip into Emma's woolen sweater. From force of habit, the moment she had left the bed, her feet had gone into her slippers. But here she was, going up into the darkness and the cold. Her pajamas, sturdy cotton though they were, were not enough.

The beam of the flashlight moved over the landing. There, in a corner, Gene saw the lampbase standing starkly bereft of any shade. At the bottom of it, two vicious-looking prongs reached upward. Against one of these, Gene reflected, Mrs. Van Allen had fallen. The cold seemed to deepen and Gene wondered if she would not do well to go back and get the sweater.

But that might alarm the old lady. She would know Gene could not have gone to the cupola so quickly. She might become unduly agitated. She might—*No*, Gene told herself. *I'll run. That'll help.*

Her feet went swiftly up the rest of the way, fol-

lowing the bright beam of the light. At the third floor, Gene paused and sent the beam of light down the hall, which seemed almost as long as the one on the second floor. *But,* Gene told herself, *the door is to the left. It's the second door.*

Her teeth were chattering. She thought, as she moved forward, *I go through the storerooms first. It's possible I might find something in there to slip into. You never can tell.*

Far at the bottom of her mind there seemed to come an eerie echo, *You never can tell.*

Gene dismissed that thought. She sent the beam of the flashlight forward and hurried on. There was a door, dark and small-paneled. She passed it and came to the second.

"This is it," she murmured, putting the flashlight under one arm. It was difficult to keep the light so that the door and the right key were in the glow. *I must be careful,* Gene told herself, *not to lose the cupola key.* The storeroom key went into the lock and turned. *But,* Gene went on, *I don't think I'd mistake it. It's different from all the rest.*

There came the unwilling instant when she must push open the storeroom door. Gene took a deep breath and her hand turned the knob. She stepped inside and now she felt not only chilly, but drenched in a damp, cold atmosphere.

Quickly she flashed the beam over the storeroom. She had thought of it as in the singular, but vaguely

recalled that Mrs. Van Allen had said "storerooms." That was what they seemed to be — very large ones. The light crept over great boxes and barrels, and a large piano covered with a white cloth.

"She said," Gene chattered, "to go straight ahead." Straight ahead she went. There was a wide doorway opening into a room containing a billiard table. Unlike the amusement room in the Ainslee home, this billiard room had not seen service for many years. It was heavily laden with more boxes and several clothes baskets. These, also, were covered with some white material. So much furniture was stacked about, that it was difficult to find a pathway. At the far end of the great space Gene saw the other door, the door to the cupola.

Not until she was almost up to it did she notice the pile of garments lying over the back of a high chair. The clothing was not covered, and appeared to have been brought up here recently. A black silk coat was on top of the heap.

Gene did not stop to think about the material, however, nor the size. It was simply something to grab up and put on. This she did; she did not need to relinquish her hold on the flash, the sleeves were so wide. At first the touch of the thing added to her chill and brought closer the moldy scent. But presently Gene could feel the warmth and the comfort of the coat.

For just a moment she paused, setting the flash-

light down, so that she could button the coat closer. She found it did not button, but tied, so the ample garment went about her snugly. *There!* Gene told herself. *That's better.*

Not much better, however. Ahead of her the cupola door waited, and beyond that, the steps that led upward. Up and up. Gene would not take time to think. She must not think, except of Mrs. Van Allen, so very ill, waiting for her to bring back that precious box.

The squat key went into the lock, but Gene did not turn it at once. She stood there, looking at the dark wood. This door was different from any of the others she had seen. It was low and very narrow.

This won't do! Gene scolded herself. *I'll have to get going, or it'll be daylight before I get back.*

Daylight!

Her eyes tore away for another stolen moment and she peered back into the mysteries of that second storeroom. The quiet was so heavy it was almost a weight upon her, and it was completely dark. If there were any windows unobstructed by furniture and boxes, they gave no evidence of the first glimmer of the day.

No. It was not time for the day. This was now that hour just before the dawn. And, Gene reflected with a pang, whoever had experienced it as she was now would agree it was the darkest hour truly.

"Oh!" Gene spoke aloud in her irritation. "What

good is this doing? I'm getting nowhere — absolutely nowhere. Here I am, halfway there, I'm sure. All I have to do is unlock this door, and — "

The key turned. She pressed the door inward. It moved to the right. Gene was holding the flashlight up, so the beam passed over and above another door, directly before her. She moved the light to the left and there were the stairs, of rough wood, with a spindled railing shooting straight upward. Holding the flashlight high, Gene saw that only at the start the stairs went up vertically. Over her head she could see the railing going round and round in a circle that finally lost itself in deepest shadow.

"It's far enough," she heard her own voice saying huskily. "But if I'm going to get up there, I'd better start."

As her feet moved forward, the old wood protested with creaks and squeaking moans, but Gene had the solace of windows that were not covered. She went on her upward way, counting four windows, small, narrow slits, but showing a sky where stars were shining. More than that, Gene could get a glimpse of the sleeping town. She thought, *I'm not in a wilderness. There are people, hundreds of people, all about me. I don't know why I should feel jittery.*

Nevertheless she did. A million people would be of little help if they could not hear her, when she tried to cry out.

You're alone, Gene, all alone. There came the

voice again that had warned her not to re-enter the Old House. *You've asked for trouble, and you're going to get it!*

"I'm going to get the box for Mrs. Van Allen!" Gene said the words aloud. It seemed the stairs joined in a hollow chorus to repeat, "The box for Mrs. Van Allen." A thread of spider web caught at her face and she dashed it away with her free hand. The flashlight bobbed perilously and almost fell from her grasp. "Oh!" Gene whispered under her breath and stopped for a moment. There was a dull, bumping noise which seemed to come from far away. It was the beating of her own heart.

Taking a deep breath, Gene flashed the light up and the glare spread to show the ceiling of the cupola. "I'm — there," she breathed.

As the old lady had foretold, Gene had no difficulty in finding the trunk. There was no other furniture in the small space. Going to her knees, she went to work. The trunk lid came up easily, and there, on top of a foam of folded white material, lay the metal box. It was about the size of a shoe box, with a handle which could be lifted up. As Gene's fingers slipped through the handle, she was surprised that the box was so light.

She stood up, carefully closed the trunk, and before she started on her downward way allowed herself the pleasure of another look through the two top windows. One, she knew, looked over the lake, to-

ward the Ainslees', where Barbara was, safe and sound. And there was the guest house. It looked small from there. Gene thought she saw a glimmer in one of the windows but could not be sure. *Zella must be sleeping by now,* she thought.

She had backed up a little and she caught herself just in time or she would have fallen down the creaking steps. Carefully she held to the railing and lighted her way with the flashlight. "Now," she breathed, in grip of sudden fright, "now, I'd better make haste slowly." She started on down. "And not stop for any more stargazing," she added.

The keys were in her left hand, the box under her left arm. It was somewhat awkward, but the prize had been achieved; now to deliver it to Mrs. Van Allen. Gene thought about her, lying pale and drawn, waiting. She wanted to hurry, but she knew that would be foolish. If she should fall, and if something should happen to the old lady, how would anyone know? Gene thought, *I've got to watch my step.*

She thought of nothing but the business of going back through that cupola door, back through the storerooms.

There was the door. It seemed even lower than Gene remembered, but now she was on level space, now she could move faster. She put the flashlight in her left hand while she inserted the squat key. The lock turned readily, and Gene opened the door. The beam of light showed what seemed to be the floor

of the storeroom.

Gene moved forward. She was reaching to put her hand back for the keys when there came a sudden creaking noise. She jumped, looking up. Too late, she saw the heavy spring and knew that this was not the door to the storerooms. This was a door she had never come through before. And it had closed behind her, with the keys on the other side!

In that moment Gene knew complete panic. She tried desperately to conquer her fears. *I'll just push it open again,* she told herself. *It's the wrong door, one I never saw before, but what of that? I'll push it, and —*

Nothing happened. She had known it would not. She was locked in some strange and secret place. "Oh, why didn't Mrs. Van Allen tell me there were two doors in here?" she demanded aloud.

Her own thought came sternly reprimanding: *Why weren't you more careful about where you were going? This door is not nearly as high as the one to the storeroom. Mrs. Van Allen was too ill to tell you about it. You should have looked where you were going!*

But where was she going?

The flashlight's beam faltered as Gene's shaking hand sent it about the bleak space no more than three feet square. Then she did cry out, for there were more stairs here, stairs that went down like a ladder. It was little short of a miracle that Gene

had seen them. For a long moment she stood deathly still, peering down. She could not see the bottom of these steps. On either side were stone walls. There was not even a handrail to cling to for support.

"How can they be here?" Gene heard her own trembling voice cry. Vainly she tried to puzzle out where she was. It must be the side of the Old House around which she and Emma had walked, where the two parlors and the study were located. "It must be built right in the wall!" Gene said aloud in an awe-struck voice.

Then she faced the fact there were no stars to see now, no distant, twinkling lights. There were only these ladder-like steps, and a dank, dreary odor.

After what seemed a long time, Gene achieved some sense of balance, enough to make her see there was only one thing to do, only one hope. The steps must lead somewhere. Wherever they led, there she must go.

Afterward, when it was all over, Gene could never relate the full terror of that descent. She could not tell how many steps there were. She was forced to descend them as anyone goes down a ladder, feet first, face to the stairs.

Every now and then she stopped to light the way, and then she would turn back again to face the steps, to clutch the box and make her way down, down.

The box was definitely a burden now. Several times Gene was tempted to leave it and go on. She

would stop and, clinging to the damp and spongy wood, gather the last ounces of her flagging will power. *I won't leave it! I won't!*

Then, presently, the steps turned at a sharp angle, still descending. The air was becoming so heavy, so oppressive, that Gene was afraid she would never reach the bottom of the flight, wherever that might be.

She found out very soon. The steps ended at an earthen floor. The flashlight showed a low, tunnel-like opening. Gene sent the gleam down that tunnel, but the light did not find the end. The long, gaping square seemed to extend into nothingness.

But it was not simply a crude hole in the earth. It was finished roughly, on all sides, with what appeared to be concrete.

"Oh, where does it go!" Gene moaned. She was kneeling on a rough surface that pressed cruelly through the silk coat, but she was unaware of that discomfort. She was becoming faint from the foul air. It seemed she could not gather the strength to go on.

And yet there was no other way to go. Weak as she was, she knew that. The ladder steps led only to a blank wall at the top.

"I've got to go through the tunnel," Gene whispered to herself. "I — can't walk. It's too low. But if I bend over, maybe I can make it."

She found that by bending down so low that the

flashlight almost scraped against the uneven floor, she could walk.

"Easier than — crawling," Gene told her aching muscles. "And — I've got to hurry!"

It seemed that she moved along this painful way for hours and hours. She was forced to stop many times. She knew that she changed her two burdens, the flashlight went to her left hand, the box to her right. She held fast to the box, although it did scrape, and once it fell. Gene thought vaguely, *I hope there's nothing breakable in it.* But as she moved on and on, as breathing became more difficult, the box lost much of its importance. Nothing seemed important any more, except fresh, sweet air.

When she felt she could not go another step, the flashlight showed the ending of the underground passage. It struck flatly against a wooden door with two hinges on it, and a large wooden handle.

Fresh hope gave Gene a spurt of strength, but she could no longer walk, even in that humped-over position. She was forced to cover the remaining way on her knees. When she reached the handle and turned it, she was sobbing, "I've got to — make it! I've got to!"

The door, wherever it led, opened easily and Gene fell through the opening. She lay there, not knowing where she was, nor caring, but little by little, as she breathed in the drafts of life-giving air, strength returned. When she opened her eyes and looked about

her, the first thing she saw was a low, wide window in a stone wall, opening inward. It seemed to hang there in space. Then Gene's eyes made out the long hook from the ceiling, that held the window open.

The first thing she said to herself was: *Why, it's light! It's daytime!*

Shaking, she rose to her feet. She saw the door through which she had come and was moved by a powerful urge to blot out the sight of the tunnel. She pushed the door shut. For a moment she did not understand the strangeness of what she saw. There was no handle, no knob on this side of the door. In fact, there was no door at all. It seemed to have disappeared in solid stone.

Gene pressed the hair back from her face. "Oh, maybe I'm — " She halted. Maybe she was seeing things. Maybe this was all a dreadful dream. Maybe she had not come through an endless, horrible tunnel.

Gene's hand felt warm and moist. She looked at it. There was a red smear on her fingertips, a bright touch of color on hands that were grimy and scratched.

Something like a short laugh escaped her dry, aching lips. "Well, it's no dream anyhow." She was conscious, too, of the ache in her knees. A look at them showed the jagged rips in her pajamas. She murmured, "I must be a sight."

Not that it mattered much. What mattered now

was a little time to rest, to collect herself. There was a wooden chair against the wall under the window. It was not much of a chair, being minus a back, but Gene walked to it slowly and sank down. She let the box and the flashlight fall to the floor.

It was a cement floor, but smooth and recently swept. There were damp places where a broom had streaked across. Gene's eyes looked at the streaks, and moved beyond them. She saw the other three walls, the stout square posts that held up the ceiling. Against one wall were several tables, two of which had empty jars and bottles on them.

What was most important, what she had seen but was not ready to tackle as yet, were the stairs showing beyond one of the posts.

Gene's eyes closed. *I should go on,* she thought. *But I'm so tired, I don't feel able to move.* But she was feeling so much better than when she had been struggling through that terrible tunnel. The air was good, good. Gene thought, *I'm glad somebody forgot to shut that window.*

Somebody forgot. Her eyes opened wide and she sat up straight. That was what Mrs. Van Allen would be thinking — that somebody forgot, or had failed.

"I can't sit here!" Gene told her protesting muscles. "What's the matter with me? Oh, I've lost so much precious time — I've got to get to her!"

She felt dizzy when she bent down to retrieve the flashlight and the box. For a moment she had to

stand with one hand against the wall and wait for her vision to clear. *I'll have to go a little easy, I guess,* she told herself. *But—I can't stop again—not till I give her this box.*

There were only twelve steps this time. Gene counted them as she went up. She opened the door at the top and received a surprise. She was in a garage. There was a car in it, a blue coupe. Wonderingly, Gene made her way alongside it but stopped when she came to another door. She opened this and saw four or five steps leading to still another door.

Gene could not have gone on just then, no matter how great her wish to get back to Mrs. Van Allen, so she paused, breathing heavily. She looked back toward the car and saw the outside doors beyond it. They were closed.

She heard the voice then, overhead, a man's voice, vastly irritated. "Will you please stop pacing around and get to sleep!"

"Sleep!" A woman spoke in a burst of scorn. "I can sleep anytime!"

"Well," growled the man, "I'd like to sleep *now*. If you can't, at least you can sit down and be quiet."

The woman cried, "When there's so much at stake? Oh, can't you see we must strike while the iron is hot?"

Evidently the man could endure no more. "I can't see anything right now. I'm all in. You've prowled the whole night!"

"Oh, don't you understand?" the woman exclaimed angrily. "Can't you see what this means to us?"

"I told you I can't see anything! I'm tired, do you understand, tired! You can go on with the job in the morning." He groaned. "It's morning now!"

Swift footsteps resounded overhead, then quiet. Gene stood leaning against the wall, looking up. Her lips were parted, but she scarcely breathed. She knew who the speakers were and where she was. This was the guest house, of course. Upstairs were Bertram and Zella Dodds — but what were they saying? What did it mean?

Gene was too weak, too exhausted to make any semblance of sense of the smattering of talk, except that Zella had been up most of the night and Bertram was now irritated. Suddenly the voices started again.

Zella Dodds said, "Oh, Bertram, you've got to talk this over with me! I've done it all so far. Don't you understand, it must be one more time. Right away!"

"Zella — " he seemed to say her name through set lips.

"Don't be difficult. You'll thank me later on. Just as you've thanked me many times before."

Bertram said nothing. He groaned deeply.

Zella Dodds went on: "Now, we must plan this carefully. Maybe it would be better if you came over with me this time. Emma has returned. I know that for sure."

Out of the maze, that bit of information served as a rock to Gene. Emma had returned. She was with Mrs. Van Allen. If anything *had* happened, Emma was there. But, surely, nothing was wrong. Emma really understood. Emma knew what to do.

Zella Dodds was saying, "Our little guest complicated things. I thought she caught on when I was over there last. Believe me, my dear, I had a bad scare. But she's such a sweet, stupid thing."

Bertram muttered something, but Gene heard none of what he said. Zella's words burned in her mind. *Our little guest — I thought she caught on — but she's such a sweet, stupid thing.*

Gene whispered to herself, "Why, Zella must mean — *me!*"

The realization forced her to lean against the wall. *I'm going to faint!* she thought, wildly helpless. *But I can't! I have to think — think fast!* She shook her head. *I'm all right, now — I've got to listen — and think!*

It was not difficult to listen, to hear what Zella was saying.

"Well, sleep if you can. I'm going back over there right now, and I'll work on Emma this time!" And Zella began walking swiftly across the floor overhead.

Gene tried desperately to make sense of it all. *Work on Emma!* That made no sense, but what did have a most alarming meaning was that Zella might be coming down these very stairs in a few minutes.

She'll find me here! I can't run — I haven't the strength to run. A calmer voice told Gene: *Then, don't try. After all, why should you run? Use your head!*

That was it, why should she try to run away? Whatever it was that Zella had done, or intended to do, it was something concerning Emma.

What would I do if I had just come here and hadn't heard anything she said? Gene asked herself. The answer was clear. She would still regard Zella Dodds as a friend. She would be very glad indeed that she had come from the darkness of the tunnel to the safety of the guest house. "Well," Gene whispered, "that's what I've got to pretend—that I'm so glad to see her!"

The situation was not as difficult as it had at first appeared, but Gene knew there was something else. Yes, there was the box. That was a secret she would have kept, but now she could not. The whole thing had to be explained. *I'll simply tell her the truth,* Gene thought. *The box is locked. Whatever is in it will be Mrs. Van Allen's secret. Zella need not know. No one will know. And the keys —*

The keys were up there in that other door at the foot of the cupola. Perhaps no one could get the keys now. Perhaps —

No! Gene knew this line of thought was useless thinking. Minutes were passing. Zella would be coming down.

Gene Knew Zella Would Come

I can't be standing here! Gene told herself, and glanced backward. *I know. I'll be on the steps, just coming up.*

She moved toward them as swiftly as she could. Once she stumbled and in the nick of time caught herself from falling. She opened the door at the head of the stairs, descended there, and as she did so, she heard Zella saying sarcastically, very close at hand, "Pleasant dreams!"—a parting word for Bertram, Gene supposed.

Gene uttered an anguished groan.

Zella apparently did not hear it and Gene repeated the sound. She had flung herself down upon the steps, leaving the door open only a little way. It would seem as though she had tried to reach it, but could not quite succeed, Gene hoped.

The second moan reached Zella's ears. Gene heard the swift footsteps pause. She could feel the air of attention that gripped the woman.

More loudly, Gene moaned again. She put into it all her weariness and discomfort, and yes, her fears.

Zella Dodds cried, "Oh, who is it?"

Gene moaned again. "Help me! Oh, help me!" she cried.

"Where are you?"

"On — the steps — here."

For an instant Zella hesitated. Then she came swiftly to the door and opened it with a jerk.

"Gene!" she cried. "Why—Gene, what are you

doing *here?*" It was almost a reprimand, for the woman must have felt a twinge of fear on her own account. But Gene had other factors to speak for her. There was her disheveled appearance, the blood on her hand, and, though she did not then know it, the scratches and smears on her face.

Zella Dodds changed her tone. "Whatever happened to you?"

Gene lifted her head weakly. She took a moment to say, amazed, "Why, Zella! It's — you! Where am I?"

"You're in the guest house, or almost there. Can you walk? Are you hurt?" The jerky words betrayed Zella's attempt to fathom the reason for the girl's presence there.

"I wish you'd help me," Gene said weakly. "I — I've had the most terrible experience."

That was easy to believe. Zella Dodds forgot or postponed her other plan and came down the steps. Another wave of dizziness engulfed Gene.

It seemed for a terrifying instant that the woman, tall and strong, bent over her with malicious intent, that she was going to strike.

Gene gave a low moan of anguish — real this time — and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER EIGHT

ON GUARD

Gene feeling a coolness against her lips, opened them. Water trickled down her throat; some splashed over her chin. At first, through a mist, she saw a figure bending over her! Gene was seated on the floor of the garage and Zella was giving her a drink.

"Oh," Gene said, "I thought you were going to—" She caught herself.

Zella Dodds bent closer. "What did you say?"

"I said, I mean, I thought you were somebody else. I've been — in a sort of bad dream."

"I believe it." The woman rose to her feet. "Are you feeling better now? Can you talk?"

Gene nodded. But she thought to herself, *I won't talk much. I won't say any more than I have to. And I mustn't forget! I'm glad to see her. I'm glad to be here.* She looked about the garage. "Did — did you say this was the guest house, Zella?"

"Part of it. This is the garage. The living quarters are on the second floor."

Gene nodded. She pushed one hand over her head, and then she noticed that she did not have the box or the flashlight. She gave a start.

"The box? Where is it?"

"Right here." Zella pointed to a low table which held an accumulation of tools and boxes. "Do you want to get up now?"

Gene was trying to rise. "Yes," she said. "Please."

Zella Dodds helped her, looking at her strangely.

Gene said, "I must look simply awful!" She was proud of herself for managing to get the feel of the part she must play. Zella was completely fooled by the "stupid, sweet" little girl. Gene smiled wanly. "I had a dreadful experience, Zella. I don't think anybody else would believe me if I told them." She shuddered. "Oh, how I wished you were with me, but I couldn't see any light. I was sure you were asleep."

The wary light went out of the slanting eyes, to be replaced by a pretense of friendliness and concern. Gene knew now that it was only a pretense, but she must never let Zella guess. "Want to tell me about it?" Zella asked.

Gene nodded. "Yes. But — I've got to hurry back to the house. Mrs. Van Allen is all alone. She's been alone for hours." Gene had heard Zella say that Emma had returned, but this would show that she of course had just come up the cellar steps, and so knew nothing of what had been said.

Zella warmed noticeably. "Oh, I think Emma is back, so you don't need to be in too great a hurry."

So you can make me talk all the more! Gene thought, but she smiled weakly and said aloud, "I'm

glad, but Mrs. Van Allen is waiting for that box." Her hand groped for Zella's arm. "Will you walk over there with me, Zella? I'll — tell you about it then."

Zella, who had wanted to go right over to the Old House, was delighted to be of service. "Certainly, Gene." She took the box and held out an arm for Gene. "You just hold on to me."

"Th-thanks a lot." Gene held to the sleeve of the same boxy coat Zella had worn at their last meeting. "I — I can carry the flash," she added.

Zella raised her eyes quizzically. "A flashlight and a mysterious box. What *have* you been up to, Gene?" But she smiled as she finished. Perhaps she feared that she had been too eager, that Gene might not tell her.

"It does seem funny, doesn't it?" Gene said. "But— it wasn't funny. Not at all!"

"No, I believe that. Girls like you aren't often falling down cellar steps at the crack of dawn, are they?"

What does she mean by that? Gene thought. But she said, "I — I was falling *up*, Zella." She took advantage of the weakness that assailed her and let her feet falter.

Zella said, opening the garage door, "Take it easy, now. Do you want to sit down a while longer?"

Gene shook her head. "Oh, no. I've got to get back. Really."

"All right. But keep holding on to my arm. We'll walk slowly."

The doors swung wide. "I'll leave them open," Zella said. She added, to make conversation, it seemed, "I could have taken you out the front door, but that's around the other side. This is quicker."

Gene was looking at the sky. It showed streaks of pink against which the branches of the trees were black and lacy. There was something else outlined against that sky — the cupola. Gene looked at it with a new awareness. She must have let her eyes remain up there longer than she knew, for Zella said, "Spooky looking thing, isn't it?"

"Yes," Gene slowly agreed. She looked directly at the woman. Zella's face was bathed in the soft, uncertain glow. If Gene had not known better, she would have thought that Zella was beautiful. Perhaps she was, just as a serpent is fascinating. *I must remember that I like her,* Gene thought. *I must remember that I trust her.* She said, "Zella, that's where I went last night."

"That's where you went, last night?" The woman repeated. She gave a light, disbelieving laugh.

"I mean, this morning. It was about three o'clock, I guess."

"But Gene dear, I found you on our cellar steps — or what we call a cellar at the guest house."

Gene nodded as though she were trying to remember. "Y-Yes. But that's where I came *out.* You

see, I went up to the cupola for Mrs. Van Allen. She wanted that box."

They walked along in the rustling leaves and as Gene paused, Zella prompted, "Yes? You went up to the cupola? Then what, Gene?" How hard she was trying not to seem overeager!

Gene took a deep breath. "Well, I missed my way coming down. I opened the wrong door by mistake, Zella. I went down — oh, so many steps, and then through a tunnel."

"Well — ?" Zella said, looking at her so intently that Gene felt a little shiver of fear.

"I know it's hard to believe, but that's what happened. And I came out in that cellar. The door closed after me. You wouldn't know a door was there."

Zella Dodds kept looking at her so intently that Gene let herself stumble. She uttered a little cry. "Oh, Zella, it was awful! I fell — and I could hardly breathe. If only you had been there!"

"Too bad I wasn't," the woman said. They walked along for a moment in silence. Zella Dodds said presently, "Why would she send you up there at such an ungodly hour?"

Gene sighed. "She was so ill. There's something in that box she wants. She said it was precious — just to her." Then, because Gene was afraid she might suffer a lapse in her role, because she was so utterly weary, she let herself lean heavily upon the

woman's arm. "It isn't much farther, is it Zella?" she asked quaveringly.

"We're almost there. We'll go to the kitchen door. I think I see a light through one of the shutters." Zella made a sound of irritation. "The way that house is boxed in, you can hardly tell if the lights are on or not."

But Zella could tell, Gene thought. Zella had sharp eyes. She had come over before because she had seen the lights. That was because Zella Dodds had been watching the Old House like a crouching cat, waiting for a chance to spring. Gene tried to remember what the woman had said back there in the guest house. Something like: "It has to be one more time." And then she had said, "We must strike while the iron is hot." There had been more, but Gene could not recall everything. One bit, however, she would never forget. Zella Dodds had said something that boded ill for Emma. "I'll work on Emma," she had said.

Gene thought, *You won't see Emma when I'm not there, Zella Dodds. You won't do anything to hurt her if I can help it!*

But Zella was so tall, so strong. As they came to the steps leading up to a latticed porch, Gene thought, *More steps to climb — I'm so tired of steps!* Unwittingly, she must have given voice to her thought!

Zella looked at her quickly. "What did you say,

Gene?"

"I was just thinking," Gene said weakly, "I've climbed so many steps."

"Lean on me. I'll help you up."

"I am leaning on you. I'm afraid I'm a dreadful nuisance."

"Not at all, my dear." Zella spoke briskly. It seemed almost unbelievable that this woman had been up most of the night herself.

They went up together and Zella put the box down on a low table outside the door while she knocked. She called out softly at the same time, "Emma — Emma — it's Zella Dodds." She turned to Gene. "Emma'll hear me. One of those windows is open a little. See?"

Gene looked toward the window which must be over the breakfast nook, but she did not see it. Her vision was blurred, and when the door opened and light glared out into her face, Gene had to close her eyes.

She heard Emma cry, "Oh, Miss Gene! Oh, the Missus told me you went up to the cupola, but the storeroom door was shut. I couldn't open it! I couldn't find you!"

Zella Dodds took command. "It's all right, Emma. Gene can explain everything. She's dreadfully tired now."

There was a new note in Zella's voice, a new confidence. Emma had backed up Gene's story about the

climb to the cupola, so it was believable that Gene had spoken nothing but the truth. She had come out through a secret door in the cellar of the guest house. But perhaps Zella wanted to be absolutely certain on that point. She said to Emma as she helped Gene into the kitchen, "Gene missed the cupola door and went down through the tunnel!"

Emma's chubby hands went up. "Oh, mercy on us!" she cried. "Through the tunnel. No wonder you're all scratched, child!"

Gene managed a smile. "I'm all right, Emma. You — you know about the tunnel?"

"Yes, I do." Emma was at Gene's other side now. "I went through it just once. That was years ago, and that was enough. The Mister's father built that thing, going right through to the guest-house cellar."

"That's right," Gene agreed. "And you can't even see the door when it's shut, can you?"

Emma shook her head. "No, you can't."

Gene looked about the big room, clean and airy. She took a deep breath. "It's so good to be back again where I can breathe," she said shakily. "For a while there I thought I'd choke!"

"I know." Emma nodded. "Some air gets down into the tunnel, but it's not enough." Gene was swaying a little and Emma added hastily, "Oh, Miss Gene, let me get you up to bed."

Zella put in: "I'll help you, Emma. I'll be glad to do anything I can."

This is it, Gene thought. *You want to come along, so that after I'm out of the way you can work on Emma, and carry out your little scheme, whatever it is. Well, you won't!* Aloud she said, "Oh, I'm sure we can manage now, Zella. I've caused you enough trouble."

The woman shrugged her shoulders. "It was no trouble at all, Gene. I'm so glad I could help." She said to Emma, "Is Mrs. Van Allen asleep?"

"Yes, she is, praise be," Emma said. "I'm surely glad I came home when I did. I just had a feeling I should. My boy was coming along fine, and the nurse said I'd better go home and get some rest."

Gene laughed ruefully. "How much rest did you get, Emma?"

"Well," — one chubby hand pushed a strand of hair back into the knot on her head — "not much. But I feel good just the same, if you know what I mean, Miss Gene. The Missus is resting, and you're back, safe and sound."

It was then that Gene got the idea. It came to her with the realization that she was not the only one who had spent a broken night. So had Emma, and so, indeed, had Zella. Neither of them had clambered down a secret stairway, nor crawled through an underground tunnel, but they could not be at their best. If they could hold out a little longer, she certainly could, too.

Gene saw now that she *must* keep going a little

longer. She must not try to keep Zella away from Emma, but rather she must try to give the woman an opportunity to do whatever it was she had in mind.

Whatever Zella has done before, she plans to do again, Gene told herself. *She said that I spoiled things for her, or almost spoiled them. What did I almost spoil? It wasn't anything that hurt anybody — so I don't need to be afraid she'll actually harm Emma.*

Gene went to the breakfast nook, despite Zella's murmured: "Gene, you'd better get up to bed, don't you think?"

Gene smiled at her, then at Emma, who stood, hands folded anxiously. She said, "Well, if you aren't too tired, Emma, I'd be so grateful for a cup of cocoa."

Emma beamed. "I should say I'm not too tired, Miss Gene. You just sit there, honey, and I'll make it in a jiffy. I have the chocolate syrup all ready. The Missus likes it, too."

Zella should have said good-by then. But she did not. Gene had known it would be so. Zella Dodds had no intention of leaving — yet. She said, "Emma, if you'll put this precious box somewhere, maybe I can help you."

"Oh, land's sakes, yes. The box!" Emma took it and placed it on a chair near the hallway door. She said to Gene as she came back, "The Missus was

certainly upset, wasn't she, wanting that box?"

Gene nodded, and Emma sighed.

"Well, there's no need to worry on *that* score." She squared her shoulders. "Now, I'll get busy." She said it under her breath as one who works hours alone. "I'll get out the syrup, and maybe a slice of toast."

Gene leaned back against the built-in seat. Her lashes closed over her eyes. "I'm tired," she murmured, and with a listless movement put the flashlight down. "It's — good to be here."

Now, Zella, she said to herself, *get busy. I'm not as tired as you think. Whatever you're going to do, you'll have to do it now, because I've already planted the idea that I don't need you to help get me to bed. You'll have to go back to your guest house. So get busy now.*

Zella played into Gene's hands readily. She went with Emma to the sink that partitioned the room. As they stood there together, washing their hands, they were facing Gene. They did not know it, but she was watching them. Her head was turned away, but she could see them plainly enough. To make things more certain, Gene let her head fall backward, and put one hand up over her eyes. It seemed that she was resting easily, but she had never been more alert in all her life.

She heard Emma murmur, "The dear girl! I was going to have her get cleaned up a bit, but we'll let

her rest."

"Yes," Zella whispered, far too compassionately, "she's had such a trying experience. The hot cocoa will do her a world of good, I'm sure."

Gene thought, *I'm sure it will, too. It will give you a chance to stay over there by Emma, where I can watch you. Then — I'll know.*

Zella's voice went still lower. "Now, if you'll tell me where things are, Emma — "

"Oh, yes, Mrs. Dodds. It's nice of you to help. We'll get the milk and butter out of the icebox."

They stood near it, close together. Emma brought out the milk bottle and the butter carton and handed them to Zella, who tucked both under her left arm. Then, while Emma stood there, one hand to her chin, wondering if there was anything else that might appeal to Gene, the girl saw Zella step back a little. Her right hand went with incredible swiftness to a pocket of her coat and she brought out something small, something Emma did not see, which she placed behind the butter carton.

Emma was saying, "I think that's all now," and closed the door. She turned to smile at Zella, but the woman was frowning slightly, looking about the room.

She said, "Emma, where's your clock?"

"Clock — ?" Emma echoed vaguely.

"Yes. I hear it ticking — but I don't see it."

Emma gasped. Her eyes widened and her lips

moved to say slowly, "There's no clock here, Mrs. Dodds. It's up in the Missus's room."

Zella glanced at Gene. The girl's eyes were closed. In no way did she reveal the wild surge of excitement that engulfed her. Zella turned again to Emma. "But — don't you hear it, Emma?"

"Yes," Emma whispered hoarsely. "Yes, Mrs. Dodds, I do!" She gave a strangled sob. "Oh, it's come again!"

Gene opened her eyes. She sat up straight. "Why, Emma," she said worriedly, "what's the matter?" But she was not looking at Emma. She was watching Zella, and she had seen that right hand fly back again to her coat pocket.

When Emma did not answer at once, Gene said to Zella, "What is it? Please tell me. I — I must have dozed off."

"It was — nothing," Zella Dodds spoke as though she were trying to be very kind. "We — we thought we heard a noise, that's all."

Emma was standing stiff and straight, her fists at her sides. "We *did* hear something," she corrected. "We heard — the ticking of the clock, Miss Gene."

"Oh?" Gene held her pose of vague realization. "I didn't hear a thing, Emma."

Emma said hollowly, "You were asleep, but we heard it." She turned to Zella. "Didn't we?"

Zella Dodds walked to the drainboard at the sink. She placed the bottle and the butter there. "I — I'm

"Yes," Whispered Emma. "I Hear It."

afraid we did," she said slowly, "but we mustn't alarm Mrs. Van Allen, Emma. We must try to be quiet."

Emma nodded, her eyes staring off into space. "Yes," she said. "We mustn't let the Missus know."

And then Gene carried on with her role. She did it expertly, she felt, with the thrill that goes with playing a part well. She went slowly toward Zella Dodds and looked earnestly into her face. "This won't make any — difference — will it?" she said. "I mean, you'll still do the book, won't you?"

The lady shrugged. "I don't know," she said. "Mrs. Van Allen said she might not want it done."

Here Emma interjected, "She said she'd sell all the treasures—that we'd go away together, the Missus and me." She almost sobbed. "I don't want to leave the place. I don't want to go gallivanting to some foreign spot at my age. I want to stay here — with my boy!"

Gene's hand went about her shoulders. "Oh, don't worry about it, Emma. I'm sure it will all come out all right."

"I'm sure it will, too," Zella agreed. "And maybe I'd better run along." Perhaps the girl looked a little startled, because Zella said quickly, "In case Mrs. Van Allen does waken, too many of us might disturb her, don't you think?"

Gene realized that Zella had done what she had come to do. She had brought to Emma's ear the

sound of an unseen clock. It was true that Gene had not heard it, but she knew that Emma truly had. That was enough. That was all that Zella Dodds wanted.

But why? Gene thought. She tried to figure it out, to find the real meaning. *Was that,* she wondered, *what Zella had meant by working on Emma?* Yes, that was it. But again came the question, *Why?*

Fast on that, was another: *Was it Zella who made the clock tick before?* Back in the guest house Gene had thought that Zella was bent upon a repetition of some malicious scheme. She had every reason to think so. Zella had said as much.

I'm tired! Gene thought. *Oh, I'm so tired. I can't make it out. Everything's so muddled.*

She felt Zella's hand patting her shoulder. "You talk to Emma," the woman said quietly. "Try to make her feel at ease. I — I really am at a loss. I don't know what to say."

Gene looked at her. Slowly she nodded her head. "I'll — try," she said, and her lips moved in a smile —not, she feared, a very convincing one, but perhaps Zella would lay it to her weakened condition. That would be partly true. Gene had been shaken, and the sight of the chubby old lady standing there distractedly rubbing her hands together did not make her feel any better.

Gene was thinking through it all, *How could she have known in the first place? It was a secret. Har-*

riet Van Allen wouldn't have told it. It was something like a — like a family skeleton.

Zella Dodds was looking at her intently, the slanting eyes gleaming. "I'll be over later on in the morning, Gene."

Gene said, "All right." Tardily she murmured, "And thank you for everything you've done, Zella."

"Don't mention it," Zella said and made her exit.

Emma scarcely noticed that she had gone. She was still looking into space, biting her lower lip. Gene went to her and patted her on the shoulder.

"Emma," she said gently, "let's put these things away." She motioned toward the sink. "I don't think I want any cocoa after all. Let's just go to bed."

That, Gene knew, was the thing to do! Go to bed and go to sleep. She was too worn out to put all the little pieces together, to make the wretched puzzle complete, but Gene felt certain that she had most of the pieces in place. These she had studied and worked on so hard that if she could sleep over the problem, she might be able to see it all clearly.

That was the way it had been many times before, although the problems had been nothing like this one. Nothing like this had ever before happened to Gene. She was as removed from the things she knew and believed as the — well, as the cupola from the cellar in the guest house. But she had pored over difficult lines many times, worked until she was numb. Everything had seemed hopeless and so she

had gone to bed. When she had wakened — presto! The solution was there, neat and sure.

She thought, *Zella will be over later in the morning. That will be just fine!*

Emma had not moved. She stood like a miserable statue, weighted down with a pressing sorrow. All her hours of watchfulness showed now in her faded cheeks, her dull eyes. She did not see Gene as the girl went slowly about the task of putting away the milk and the butter, the nice comfortable foods that had hidden Zella's malicious act.

Gene went over to Emma and, with her arm about the old lady, led her to the hall door. It was Gene who turned out the lights.

"Do you know, Emma," she said softly, "it's actually daytime. I'm so tired. I don't know when I've been so tired." She could not repress a yawn.

Emma seemed to come to life. "Poor child!" Her voice sank lower. "You had a dreadful time, didn't you?" She remembered suddenly and stopped at the foot of the curving stairway. "Oh," she gasped, "the box!"

"I'll get it," Gene said. "Wait here." She went back to the kitchen and returned with Mrs. Van Allen's precious treasure. She said, as they began the ascent together, "Do you know what's in it, Emma?"

"Not exactly. But it's something the Mister gave her. I've never seen what's in it. But I know what's

in the trunk."

The trunk! Gene remembered. That was where the box was kept. She thought, *Everything is such a blur.*

Emma's hand went to the railing. She gripped it hard and her fingers made a swishing sound as they went on upward. She said in a whisper, "Her wedding dress is in there."

Something white. Yes, Gene had seen something white in the trunk.

It was on the first landing that Gene paused suddenly. "Emma!" she said. "I haven't got the keys. They're up there in that cupola. You know? The door that goes down those really steep steps?"

Emma had been frightened at Gene's tone, but her face relaxed. "Oh, the keys," she said. "That's all right, Miss Gene, because the Missus has two sets."

Gene, too, breathed more easily. "Oh, I'm so glad. I was worried."

As they went on up, turning out the lights on the second floor, Gene had some difficulty in recalling the happenings of the night before. The hall was drenched in light now.

Perhaps, Gene reflected, *nothing can be very frightening now. When you're so worn out, nothing much matters.*

But something did matter — a bed to sleep in. As they went into Emma's room, Gene remembered that it was Emma's bed she had used, altogether too

briefly.

But the stout little lady had already considered the best arrangement. As Gene looked about, she saw that a cot had been placed against one of the walls. Emma pointed to it. "I'll sleep there, Miss Gene. You get back in the big bed."

"But, Emma — "

"Now, you do just as I say, honey." Emma did not quite understand the girl's protest. "We don't need to fret about the Missus. She'll have a good rest. I know, because I gave her a little something."

"Oh," Gene said. She yawned again, because she could not help it. "I thought Mrs. Van Allen never took medicine."

Something of a smile hovered about the chubby lady's mouth. "That's true. But I do. I gave her one of my pills. She should sleep until nine or ten, anyhow." Emma motioned to the marble washstand. "Now, you get yourself cleaned up, Miss Gene. Maybe I'd better find you a nightgown."

Gene looked down at the coat, her pajamas, her slippers. She said, "I guess I picked up all the dust you'd been saving."

Emma was rummaging in a dresser drawer. "There was plenty of it, I'm sure." She brought out a folded blue gown and Gene took it gratefully. She said, untying the strings of the black coat, "I hope nobody'll mind what happened to this, Emma. I borrowed it from the storeroom."

"I know." The old lady sank into the rocker. "I put it up there a few weeks ago. It's all right, Miss Gene. We've been getting things ready for the missions. I'll put in something else." She rocked back and forth slightly while Gene busied herself with soap and water.

Then Emma spoke. At first it seemed she was talking to herself. She was saying, "I came home here, and there she was in my bed. I tell you, I was never so surprised." Emma turned toward Gene. "And then, when you were gone! Upstairs to the cupola, the Missus tells me. Oh, mercy on us, I had a bad time then."

Gene rubbed the towel over her face. "It's all right now, Emma. Don't think about it any more."

"I can't help but think about it. I went up there, and the door was shut. It locks when it shuts, and I didn't dare ask the Missus to dig up her other set of keys. I had to get her back to her room. First, though, I gave her the pill. Then I got her back to her room. Then I got my cot ready and waited." Emma sighed and one hand moved over her forehead. "And, now — "

Gene had hung up the towel. She went over to the chair and dropped on her knees. She had slipped into the gown and felt warm and comfortable. "Now, Emma," she said, "I want to tell you something, and I want you to believe it."

Emma said, "Yes? What is it, Miss Gene?"

"Everything is going to be all right. I know it is. I'm *positive* of it."

"Yes — ?"

"Yes, but there's just one favor I want to ask you, Emma. Don't let Zella Dodds or anybody come over here — until I tell you. Will you do that?"

"Why—sure, Miss Gene. If you want it that way."

"And Emma, don't tell Mrs. Van Allen that you heard that — that sound in the kitchen."

"Don't tell her?"

"No. It would only make things worse."

"All right," Emma sighed. "Now crawl into bed."

Gene obeyed without delay and went to sleep.

How much later it was when she was called, she did not know, but she was alert on the instant. She sat up and said, "Yes — ? What is it?"

"Come here, Gene, please," Harriet Van Allen was calling her from her room.

Gene sped to the next room.

Harriet Van Allen was sitting up in her bed. She said, "Is Emma asleep?"

Gene said, "Yes."

"That's good. Now, Gene, where's the box?"

"Oh, I'll get it for you right away." Quickly Gene returned to Emma's room. The housekeeper made a small mound upon the cot. On tiptoe, Gene went to the dresser where Emma had placed Mrs. Van Allen's treasure.

The box was gone!

CHAPTER NINE

THE FIRST PARLOR

After the first frozen moment, while Gene stood rooted to the spot contemplating this latest disaster, she came vividly to life and sped across the room to the cot.

"Emma!" She said to the mound. There was no reply and Gene did not repeat the woman's name. She saw now that there was no head upon the pillow. Emma was not lying there.

With a quick tug, Gene drew back the thick covers.

There, rolled in a worn strip of blanket, lay Mrs. Van Allen's precious box.

"Oh!" Gene's first reaction was one of intense relief, but there followed a half-humorous irritation at the stout little housekeeper. Emma was up to her old tricks, Gene reflected — seesawing in and out of danger. Taking Gene down to the depths one minute, and then high in the air the next.

Gene did not, at that moment, contemplate the picture of Emma as she had last seen the stout little lady. Emma had been very much in the depths then, and she thought she had ample cause. But none of this worried Gene now. She was concerned only with

bringing the box to the mistress of the house.

Harriet Van Allen took it in both her hands. Gene could not quite read the expression on her face, for the light in the room was dim, the shutters tightly closed. Presently the old lady said, "Gene, will you open them, please?" She spoke with difficulty, almost in a choked whisper; Gene barely caught the words. The dark old head nodded toward the windows and Gene said, "Of course."

The long panels swung inward as Gene opened the shutters on all three of the windows. She returned to the bed. "That's better, isn't it?" She smiled.

Harriet Van Allen nodded. Her hands were still on the edges of the box, but she looked up into Gene's face. "Thank you," she said.

Gene remembered why the old lady had wanted the box so desperately, but, of course, she must make no mention of such a thing. She must not let Mrs. Van Allen think of it either, if possible. She patted one of the gnarled hands and said easily, "I'm sorry it took me so long to get back."

Harriet Van Allen nodded slowly. "Yes," she said. "Emma came home. As I recall it, she gave me a pill."

"Oh?" Gene said.

"So," Harriet Van Allen smiled the ghost of a smile, "I slept. I have a suspicion about that pill."

"Well, anyway, you rested," Gene said cheerfully. "You're looking ever so much better."

She did look better, not at all like the person who

had made that sorrowful request.

Gene's eyes lingered for just a moment upon the box. She thought, *I wonder if the key to that is with the others?* It seemed best to mention then and there what had happened, or as much as was necessary to mention. She said with regret, "I opened the wrong door in the cupola by mistake, Mrs. Van Allen. The keys were in the lock when it swung shut."

"Oh?" The old lady lifted a hand and let it slip across her forehead. She seemed to be trying to recall something, but failed. "It doesn't matter, my dear. I have another set." She nodded toward her tall dresser. "In the left top drawer, at the very back, in a velvet box."

Gene said, "I'll get them for you."

"If you please, my dear."

Returning with another black cord and its jangling assortment, Gene suggested, "I could run up right now if you want me to."

"I wish you would."

"I'll be right back," Gene smiled.

As she hurried out into the hall toward the stairway, she knew where Emma was and what she was doing. A most tempting odor was wafting up, a mingled scent of frying bacon and freshly made coffee.

"Ummm," Gene murmured, "I'm famished!"

On up the stairs she went. How different the trip was this time! The sun shone in, for the shutters

on the third floor were not closed. Gene had not noticed this the last time. *But,* she thought, *it doesn't matter.* Nor did it. What mattered was that it was a new day and there was an appetizing smell coming from the kitchen.

It was less than ten minutes later that Gene was back again, handing the keys to the old lady. She said as she did so, "I saw that all the doors were locked tight."

"I knew you would." The old head nodded. "Thank you, Gene."

"That's all right." Gene glanced toward the door. "Emma's getting breakfast, and I was wondering if you'd like me to bring you a tray — or — "

"No, I'll come down."

Gene was glad to hear her say that. It meant that she was feeling better. "I'll go and dress," Gene said, starting for the door.

"Just a minute, my dear."

Gene turned. "Yes?"

Mrs. Van Allen was looking down at the box, but her eyes lifted to Gene's waiting glance. "Would you like to know what is in here?"

"Why — not especially, Mrs. Van Allen. I know it's something you value very much. That's enough, isn't it?"

The dark eyes clung to her face. "You know, Gene, the more I see of you, the more I like you."

Gene felt a warm flush going up into her hair.

She said fervently, "I like you, too, very much."

"Hmmm," Harriet Van Allen murmured. Then, abruptly: "There are letters in here, letters from my husband. I wanted to read them—one last time."

There it was, the remembrance of her fear. But Gene was certain now that she held most of the answers that would wipe away the cause of that alarm. It had been a long, long journey from the cupola to the guest-house cellar, but it had been worth it. The hours of sleep that she had enjoyed helped, too, for now Gene felt strong and sure. She came close to the bed.

"You're going to read them again and again, Mrs. Van Allen." She spoke the words from the depths of a firm conviction. "You're going to find out something before so very long, something that will make you feel better than you have in ages."

For a moment the spell held. Then a smile came to the old lady's lips. "In ages?" she said. "How old do you think I am?"

Gene placed a light kiss on her cheek. "I'll tell you after breakfast. How long will it be before you come down?"

"Oh, about twenty minutes."

"Okay. I'll tell Emma."

Gene went back to the housekeeper's room. As she dressed, she was forming her plan of action, sorting out the pieces of the puzzle that had not made sense the night before. No, Gene corrected herself,

the morning before. She had gone to bed with the rising of the sun. She knew that it was now after ten o'clock. She had noted the time in Mrs. Van Allen's room. "How many hours did I sleep, anyway?" Gene asked the zipper in her skirt. She could not say for sure, and she thought again that it did not matter. What did matter was that she was ready for Zella Dodds.

"Some things, though," Gene said as she met her own eyes in the mirror, "she'll have to tell *me*." Gene gestured with the comb. "And she will!"

As she went on toward the stairs, she could hear Mrs. Van Allen moving about, closing a dresser drawer. Heavier and more inviting grew the scent of food, and Gene flew on down to the kitchen.

Emma, swathed in a starchy, generous apron, stood before the stove. Her face was flushed, and a trail of silver hair had loosened and hung back of one ear. If she were under the dark spell of the last incident here in the kitchen, she did not show it. She had the appearance of a good cook who is about to serve a good meal.

Gene said gaily, "Oh, that smells heavenly, Emma! I'm starved! Did you think I'd never get up?"

"I hoped you'd sleep a long time, Miss Gene. You needed your rest."

Gene came nearer. "Ummm," she said, looking at the curling slices of crisp bacon in a golden row upon heavy paper toweling.

Emma said, "I'll do your eggs now, if you want."

"Let's wait for Mrs. Van Allen. She's coming right down."

Emma looked up questioningly and Gene said, "She's feeling ever so much better, Emma. I brought her the box, but she didn't open it."

Emma sighed. "That's good." She placed a platter in readiness and Gene said, "If that didn't look so good I'd scold you."

"For what, child?" Emma looked puzzled.

"For making me think you were asleep when it was that box rolled up in your bed."

"Oh, that." The housekeeper gave a low chuckle which moved the folds of the apron. "I had it at the side of my bed, and I thought I'd just tuck it in." Her face sobered. "Miss Barbara called you."

"Did she? When?"

"About an hour ago. I said you'd call back as soon as you came down."

"Emma, did she say anything special? I mean, how did she sound?"

The housekeeper lifted the glass coffee pot away from the burner. "She didn't say anything, but that she'd like to talk to you, Miss Gene." Emma motioned toward the telephone. "You'd better call her right away!"

"I will." Gene went across to the desk. "Do you know the number, Emma?"

"I don't. But I can find it for you."

"Oh, never mind." Gene smiled and leafed through the telephone book which hung from a loop of string at the side of the desk. Gene said, "Ainslee — that's about one of the first names." Her finger moved and she found it. A moment later, she was giving the number to the operator.

Barbara answered. She said, "Hello — ?" And Gene knew then and there that the night had been good to Barbara. Her voice held a lilt of joy.

Gene said, "Good morning. Did you finally get up?"

"Oh, Gene!"

"Don't say it. But the first part of the night I was a little restless. So — I overslept."

Barbara said, still in that happy tone, "I'm glad you did. Oh, Gene, I've got some good news."

"So I gathered. What is it?"

"Jim's home. He came in about six this morning. And Father Ainslee's feeling so well, he got up, and we all had breakfast together."

Gene said, "That *is* good news!" And it was, it certainly was — for reasons that Barbara could never guess.

Barbara had been a part of Gene's plan, and now Jimmy was home and he could be included. Gene had thought at first that she might need Elsie's presence, but had ruled that out. Jimmy, a tall, strong man, would be so much better.

Barbara was saying, "How's everything over there?

I tried to get in a word with Emma, but she hung up."

"Everything is simply perfect!"

From behind her, Gene heard Emma's gasp at what she must have believed was a glaring falsehood, but she continued, "Things have happened here, too, Barby, big things!"

"Oh? Tell me!"

"I can't over the phone. But listen carefully, my dear. Can you and Jimmy come over here about eleven-thirty? I mean, does he have to go to the bank this morning?"

"He's gone already, Gene. Is it important?"

"Very important." Gene's tone must have added depth to the words.

Barbara said, "Oh, I wish you could give me a clue."

"You'll get plenty of clues. I — I've made a discovery, Barby. There isn't time to tell you about it, and anyway, you'll find out soon enough."

"Yes — ?" Barbara's tone was an eager whisper.

"Here's what I want you to do. Wait for a call, and start out as soon as you get it. The idea is to come as quickly as possible without being seen from the guest house. Park your car outside the place, near the street. You understand?"

"Why — yes." Barbara was plainly mystified. "But — "

"Go right into the second parlor and just stay

there, without making a single sound, understand? I'll be in the front parlor — and you'll soon find out what's what."

"Oh, Gene, you sound so — so mysterious!"

"I know, but I couldn't possibly tell you about it now, Barby. Just believe me, will you? And get Jimmy to come with you."

"I will!" Barbara said fervently. "You — you want us to wait till you call and then come?"

"That's right. Stand by, won't you? And don't say anything to Mr. and Mrs. Ainslee." Gene had a small fright. "Are they near the phone?"

"No. They're out in the yard. It's a beautiful day."

"Is it?" Gene chuckled. "We'll sample it together after awhile. Anyway, keep them out of this if you can."

"I'm sure I can. They're going to the farm in a little while."

"Perfect!" Gene cried. "Well — that's all. When I call again come as fast as you can — second parlor. Understand?"

"Um-hum."

Gene hung up. For a moment she looked at the receiver. She heard Emma, not far behind her. "Now, what under the sun are you up to, Miss Gene?"

Gene rose and turned to face the amazed blue eyes. She patted Emma on the shoulders. "Something's

going to happen here!" she confided. "Something that'll make you happy, Emma. In fact, you're going to get the wish you want most of all!"

The housekeeper regarded her dubiously. "Oh?" she said.

"Yes, and I'm going to need your help." Gene's face suddenly sobered. She said, "Emma, there is a door leading from the first parlor to the second parlor, isn't there?"

"Why — why, yes."

Gene sighed. "That's settled. I was pretty sure, anyway. And now, about Zella. Has she been over this morning?"

Emma was looking at the girl with open amazement. She nodded, "Yes, she was over. I told her to come back about eleven, but—!"

Gene hugged her then. "That's perfect, Emma, absolutely perfect!"

"Miss Gene!" the stout little woman protested. "You're squeezing the breath out of me. Whatever is the matter, child?"

"Nothing is the matter, Emma, except that this is a simply beautiful day and I'm starving!"

"My! My!" Two chubby hands went up in the air. "Then you'd better be quick and eat your breakfast."

"No. I'll wait for Mrs. Van Allen." Gene had sobered. *Take it easy* — ran the warning of an inner voice. *There's a lot left to be done. Don't be too*

"Whatever Is the Matter, Miss Gene?"

sure — too soon.

Yes, there was a lot left to do. Gene said earnestly, "Emma, here's what I want you to do. When Zella comes over, I want you to ask her if she'll go shopping with you—marketing, and Mr. Dodds, too."

"Marketing?" Emma said blankly. "But, Miss Gene — ?"

"You have marketing to do, haven't you?"

"Indeed I have. This is my day."

Gene gave a fervent sigh. "It couldn't be better! And the Doddses will probably want to get some things, too. Anyway, I want you to ask Zella if they'll take you. You might say you have some heavy things to get and you would appreciate it if Mr. Dodds would go, too."

"Oh, my!" Emma murmured, but Gene went on: "That's all you have to do, Emma — get them to go with you, and stay an hour if you possibly can."

"An hour?"

"Wouldn't it take about that long?"

"Oh, yes, but — "

"Then that's settled."

But was it? At that moment there came a knocking at the back door and Emma whispered, "There she is now!"

Gene said hastily, "All right. I'll talk to her. You just remember what I told you." She glanced toward the hallway, hoping fervently that Mrs. Van Allen would not come down for awhile. She opened the

back door.

"Oh, Zella!" Gene said eagerly. "We're so glad you came."

"That's good," Zella spoke agreeably. She looked from one to the other. "Any special reasons?"

Gene said, "Yes. Emma has her shopping to do, and she's — well, you know what happened here."

The clock ticked, Zella. You know, because you managed it. You wanted to frighten Emma the way you frightened Mrs. Van Allen.

Zella murmured with apparent compassion, "Yes, I know."

"Well," Gene said, "there are some heavy things she has to get and we were wondering if you and Mr. Dodds could give her a hand? You know, drive her to the market?" Zella stood in silence and Gene hurried on, "Mrs. Van Allen wants to see you, too, later on. I guess she has something to tell you." This was a random shot, but it told. The eyes brightened.

"Why, yes, Emma," she said to the housekeeper, who stood looking as frightened as she was supposed to be. "Yes, we'll be glad to give you a lift, We need a few things, too. Can you go right away?"

Emma nodded. "Why, yes." She turned to Gene. "You'll take care of the Missus?"

"Oh, certainly! Now, get off your apron, Emma. Get your hat and coat."

Emma moved with surprising speed. She was

ready in a few minutes.

Gene said to Zella, "I'll tell Mrs. Van Allen that you'll be over as soon as you get back, shall I?"

Zella nodded. The bright glint was still in her eyes. "Come on, Emma," she said almost graciously, and the two went out together.

Gene heaved a deep sigh. *That is that,* she told herself. *I'm so glad she was willing to give Emma a lift.*

But, she thought, *Zella could hardly refuse.* It would seem most rude, and Zella Dodds had no intention of being rude. She had no intention of leaving the Old House, because her work had not been finished. She wanted to be agreeable, helpful — while she terrorized the helpless people here in pursuance of her scheme.

What was that scheme? Gene did not know — not yet. But she would soon.

Her hand went to her head; she pressed back her hair. She did not have time to stand here and dream. There were things to be done, now, at once. Mrs. Van Allen must have her breakfast, and she must be told something of Gene's plan.

I'd better go up and get her! Gene thought, and moved toward the hall, but then she heard the lady of the house coming down.

"Gene," she said, as she came into view, "I thought I heard Emma going out with Mrs. Dodds."

"That's right." Gene smiled. "Zella took her to

do the marketing."

"Well." Harriet Van Allen came to Gene's side, "That was nice of her."

"Wasn't it?" Gene said brightly. She thought, *I won't talk now and get her upset. She must have a good breakfast.*

They went into the kitchen, and Gene picked up Emma's apron. "I'll do my best about the eggs." She smiled. "Everything else is ready."

"I don't believe I want an egg this morning," the old lady said thoughtfully.

"Oh, yes, you do!" Gene smiled. "Or don't you trust me?"

"Certainly I trust you." There was the glimmer of a smile again in the black eyes. "I'd like it turned over, so that it's almost hard but not crisp on the edges. Now, get busy."

Gene was still smiling as she went to work. It was not long before she set the platters on the table and poured the coffee. Harriet Van Allen pronounced everything perfect, and it would have been, too, if Gene had not had that sense of passing time. They must hurry; Emma had been gone for a good twenty minutes. It was almost time to call Barbara.

Harriet Van Allen said suddenly, "You look charming in that blouse, my dear."

It was cream-colored and very plain, with a high, round neck. Gene smiled and said, "Thank you."

The old lady sighed. "It's good to see someone

young and pretty." She finished her coffee, placed the cup firmly upon its saucer. "And now, I'd like to hear about it."

Gene was trying to recall Barbara's telephone number. She repeated, "Hear about what?"

"Oh, that something that was to take ages off my life."

Gene was smiling as she rose. "You will, in a few minutes. But first of all, I have to call Barbara. I'll explain things after that."

Harriet Van Allen must have been puzzled but she asked no more questions for the moment. Leaning back quietly, she watched Gene go to the telephone, listened as the girl said, "Barbara? Is Jimmy there?" And then, "Come right away."

As Gene returned to the table, she said, "They're coming over, Mrs. Van Allen — Barbara and Jimmy. It's part of my plan. I hope you won't feel that I'm being too — well, highhanded around here, but I'm sure you're going to be very much surprised, and very happy."

"Hmmm," Harriet Van Allen murmured, studying the girl's eager face. She shook her head. "I don't know about being very happy — "

"I know," Gene said positively. "Now, I hope you'll believe me, and do what I ask you. It — it's really not much, but it's so important."

"What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to wait in the second parlor with Bar-

bara and Jimmy while I talk to Zella Dodds." Gene's thoughts flew; she wondered, *Will Bertram come with her?* But that did not seem likely. Gene recalled that she had asked, in Mrs. Van Allen's name, that Zella come over. Nothing had been said about the man. He might come, and he might not. If he did — *Well,* Gene told herself, *I'll have to talk to both of them then.*

Harriet Van Allen was saying, "You want the three of us to wait in the second parlor?"

"Yes. Leave the door open just a little, so you can hear everything we say."

"Hmmm," Harriet Van Allen murmured. "We could hear everything without leaving the door open. There is a secret panel behind the picture over the fireplace. I can open that a trifle and we can hear everything quite easily."

"That's better still! We'll keep the door closed then." Gene bit her lip. "The doors are locked now, aren't they?"

"Yes, but I have a set of keys." Harriet Van Allen's hand moved toward the skirt of her plain, dark dress. From a pocket she brought out the black cord. "This," she said, "opens both the first and second parlor." She handed it, separated from the rest, to Gene.

"You'd better come with me," Gene said swiftly. "To be sure, you'd better go in right away. As soon as Barbara and Jimmy come, I'll send them in, too.

Barbara knows about it, but I want to make sure."

"Very well." The old lady rose. Her fingers laced through Gene's. "I'm very curious about this talk with Mrs. Dodds," she said. She had lost none of her confidence, but she was tensely alert.

"I wish I could tell you, but there isn't time. The others don't know either. You'll just have to listen and find out. I — I'm going to find out some things, too." They walked down the hall where the paintings of the hunt glowed with the sheen of sunlight. The blood on the one picture seemed especially red this morning. Gene looked away from it. She said hastily, "The most important thing is not to let Zella Dodds know you're there. That would spoil it all."

"She won't know," Harriet Van Allen said positively. "To make sure, we'll open the first parlor. I'll go in from there to the second. After Barbara and Jimmy come, I'll lock the inner door."

Gene glowed with satisfaction. "Oh, you just understand everything so well, don't you?"

"Do I?" Harriet Van Allen said bluntly. "I think not. I assure you, my dear, I'm vastly puzzled."

Gene put the key into the lock and the door opened. At the same time, she heard the knock at the back door. She said, "You go in, will you? Oh, I hope it's not Zella!"

Harriet Van Allen murmured something Gene did not hear as she flew on down the broad hall to the kitchen. Even before she opened the back door,

she was greatly relieved to hear the sound of Barbara's voice.

"Come in!" Gene called, and they made a hushed entrance. Barbara was first and she whispered, "Oh, are we in time, Gene?"

"Yes, but hurry!"

Barbara said, "Gene, this is Jimmy."

It was too bad time was so pressing. Gene wanted to be able to meet Barbara's husband graciously, but that could not be, now.

Gene looked up into the dark, handsome face and said earnestly, "I'm so glad you came." She turned to Barbara. "Does he know about the clock?"

Barbara nodded. "I told him on the way over. Mother Ainslee hadn't mentioned it before, and they just left, so — "

Gene cut in: "That's fine, because this is all about that clock." She was pushing them into the hallway. "Mrs. Van Allen's in the second parlor now," she said swiftly. "Go in through the first."

"But — what are we supposed to do, Gene?" Barbara asked.

"Nothing, except to listen. When I want you to come, I'll let you know."

Jimmy spoke up quietly: "Can you give us some idea of what we're going to hear, Gene?"

"Some," Gene said breathlessly. "I'll be talking to Zella Dodds. Maybe Barbara told you she was over at your house when it happened?"

"Yes." Jimmy frowned. "She told me something, but — "

Suddenly Gene knew that Emma and Zella had returned. She fairly pushed the two up to the first parlor door. "Leave this one open," she whispered. "Go in to the second parlor, and don't make a sound."

She had to leave them and fly back to the kitchen. When she saw only the two women, laden with all their bundles, she felt another glow of satisfaction. Bertram had not come.

Gene was out of breath and had to explain. She said, "Oh, I tried to get here in time to open the door, but you beat me." Her arms went out to Emma. "Let me help you."

"It's all right," Emma said. "I'll just put things down any place." Her eyes were asking Gene: *Was I away long enough?* And Gene managed to telegraph back: *Everything is perfect!* She saw that Zella was placing her burdens upon the window seat, and she said, "That was so kind of you, Zella. Mrs. Van Allen said to thank you."

"Quite all right." The woman eased her fingers. She looked from the table about the room. "Where is she?"

"Oh, we had breakfast and she went upstairs." Gene let the worried frown crease her forehead. "She —she's upset, you know."

"I can well believe it," Zella murmured.

Gene went on, "She'll be down in a little while. She said you should go into the first parlor and wait for her there."

"I'll be glad to!" Zella said, and if she were weary from her tour, the tiredness was shed like an old cloak.

Gene went on: "I have to be leaving soon, so I asked if I might have a look about, too. I thought, if you were there, it would mean so much more. I can't appreciate these things like you can."

"Come along," Zella said, as though she could now afford to grant a favor, and they were on their way.

Zella made several comments about the paintings and about one of the chairs as they passed by, but Gene scarcely heard her. Nor did she hear much of what Zella said as they entered that first parlor. She saw still another side of this woman, the eager and deeply appreciative personality that knew and could properly view these treasures of furniture and pictures and statuary.

It did not matter much what Gene said, because Zella seemed hardly aware of her presence. She went with an almost pouncing movement from the whatnot in one corner to the tall marble fireplace. Her hands touched this and that object with the air of a priestess at some sacred rite, only with this difference: there was about Zella Dodd's voice and motions something more than mere appreciation. Gene sought for the right word, and found it: *envy*.

Gene's eyes went toward the fireplace where Zella was standing. She remembered that time was still important, that the three on the other side of that immense oil portrait were waiting, straining to hear the thing Gene had promised them. Gene heard her own voice saying, "I wonder if that's a portrait of Mrs. Van Allen?"

Zella Dodds looked up at it. "Probably. Beautifully done, isn't it?" Reverently, her fingers lifted a marble bust. It was about five inches high, a Greek head. Zella murmured, almost to herself, "Lesbia. Parian marble. Exquisite."

Gene came up close to her. "Isn't it, though?" she said. "I can even appreciate that a little — even though I'll admit I am terribly stupid." She put such emphasis upon the word that Zella cut off her envious admiration and turned to the girl. There was a small silence while they exchanged a long look. Zella broke the spell with a light laugh.

"Whoever said you were stupid?" she asked.

"You did, Zella," Gene said flatly. "I heard you when I was standing there in the garage."

The woman's face paled. She repeated, "When you were — standing there in the garage? But you were on the cellar steps!"

"I was there when you came down," Gene corrected. "But I had been listening before that for a long time."

There was a mixture of emotions in those slant-

ing eyes. The wide red lips moved, but Gene did not give the woman a chance to speak. "I know, Zella," she went on in a rush, "I know *everything*." This was a wild shot, but Gene knew she had to strike while the iron was hot, just as Zella had done. Gene went on: "You and your trick clock! When you were there beside Mrs. Van Allen's bed, you took that thing out of your pocket. You thought I didn't notice, because I was getting her a glass of water. But I knew!"

Gene took a deep breath. Against the wild fury mounting in the other's face, she talked on: "And then when you were pretending to help Emma, standing there holding the butter and milk, you held that clock up again, grabbed it out of your pocket. You thought I didn't see you, that I was too all-in to know what was going on, but I *knew*."

Gene paused, then, and she heard Zella Dodds saying, "Are you quite finished, Miss Tierney?"

"No," Gene said, "I've just started. I want to tell you that I think you're something to be pitied. I never knew anyone like you — or that husband of yours. He's tied to your apron strings. He does what you tell him — and you've told him a lot of things — before you ever came here!"

Zella gave a start, then, and her eyes went to the hallway door. Gene had closed it.

Gene continued: "I know about that, too. I have friends, even if I am so stupid. They looked you up,

Zella." Gene heard her own laugh, unreal and false. "The telephone is a wonderful thing."

Zella found her tongue. "You didn't find out anything. We haven't done anything we need to worry about."

"Oh, haven't you!" Gene raged. "Don't you know that people can die of fear? You were scaring Mrs. Van Allen so that she thought she — " Gene broke off. "Oh! And you were pretending you were going to write a book about her things. You never intended to write a book at all! You know what you meant to do — !"

Gene paused because, though Zella knew, she could not even vaguely guess.

Zella was almost whispering, "We had every intention of paying her a fair price."

Gene pounced upon that bit. "I don't believe it. I don't think you know what 'fair' means. You'd go to any extreme to gain what you want." Gene took another breath. "Do you know what happened to Mrs. Van Allen — after she had her breakfast? She collapsed, that's what. I tell you, Zella, if anything happens to her, you'll have to answer for it. You frightened her so. Oh, I should think you'd be scared out of your wits!"

Zella Dodds was frightened. Her face was a pasty white, almost like the face of the little statue she liked so well. But Gene was remembering something else, something she had to know. She heard Zella

saying, "You — you're wrong. You can't prove any of this!"

"Oh, can't I?" Gene said staunchly. "I can, because I know where that clock is. After you went, I found it. And that first time — "

Zella was so shocked that she finished the sentence. "That first time was an accident."

Gene scoffed, "Accident!"

"How could it be anything else?" the woman demanded harshly. "Do you think, when we had just come, that the old woman would be giving out the family secrets? I tell you, I had the clock in my bag, and when I opened it to powder my face—!"

She stopped then, because Gene was looking at her in open victory. Zella Dodds had given herself away completely, and she realized it.

"All right," she said through stiff lips, "you've got the clock. But you can't prove a thing. Not one single thing! No one would believe that a complete stranger would come in and give the family's secret worry signal. No one would believe you!"

Gene said, "Wouldn't they?"

"No," Zella said, "they wouldn't. But just to make sure — " Her eyes had flashed to the tall whatnot. There were statues there, and several heavy things that might well be used as weapons. "To make sure — " Zella said, and moved backward.

But Gene called out, "Jimmy! Barbara! Mrs. Van Allen!"

CHAPTER TEN

A SPAN IS ALL

The door seemed to burst open as they all entered at once. Gene was surrounded by them, by the safety and warm assurance she so sorely needed at that moment. She was utterly spent. Barbara's hand went into one of hers and Barbara was murmuring something. Gene could not hear the words. She saw that Mrs. Van Allen was at her other side. Jimmy strode straight to Zella.

"You will see, Mrs. Dodds," he said in a harsh voice, "that the three of us have been listening to all that passed between you and Miss Tierney. Every word you have spoken has been carefully recorded. The police are now on the way."

"Police!" Zella screamed. "Oh, no! I—we haven't done anything! I swear we haven't! We only wanted her to sell her stuff. That's our business — antiques. We weren't going to steal anything."

"You have done worse than that, Mrs. Dodds," Jimmy went on, frowning thoughtfully. "You have caused extreme mental anxiety to my — ah — client, and to various other members of the family." He paused, moistened his lips. "And there are your — er — other activities."

"That has nothing to do with you!" Zella flared.

"Perhaps not." Jimmy amended that: "No, surely not. But it has to do with you. I suggest, Mrs. Dodds, that you permit yourself to be taken quietly into custody."

Zella became a different person — a miserable, weeping creature. "Oh, please don't give us up! We meant no harm. Why, when she wrote us about some of the things she had — they're so rare — !"

Jimmy said nothing. He looked at her stoically, unrelenting, and shrugged his shoulders. Zella turned in desperation to Harriet Van Allen.

"Oh, Mrs. Van Allen, please let us go! If you don't prefer charges, if you say so — "

Harriet Van Allen seemed to grow taller. When she spoke, her voice had a bell-like quality. "You have done a great wrong, Zella Dodds."

"I see that now, but I was blinded, I tell you — blinded!" Her hands took in the room. "These marvelous things! And you had so much — so much!"

"Still these things are mine!"

"I know that. I see now that I have done a terrible thing." Zella Dodds's next words somewhat softened the hearts of her accusing listeners. "And I'm the only one, too. Bertram had no part in this. I'm the only one that's to blame."

Barbara gave a shuddering sigh in the thick silence that followed this. That sigh and Zella Dodds's restrained sobbing were the only sounds in the quiet

of the first parlor.

Presently Harriet Van Allen spoke. "You have done a great wrong, Zella Dodds, but you have also performed a great service."

The woman's mouth stopped quivering. She said shakily, "What — do you mean?"

"I mean that for a long, long time, for almost all of my life, I have moved in constant fear. Always, my ears were strained to hear the ticking of an unseen clock." She paused. "Well, I've heard it. Twice. I believed that I was surely the one who was about to die — "

Barbara murmured, "Oh, Aunt Harriet!"

"Let me finish, dear." Harriet Van Allen went on, not only to Zella but to all of them. "I didn't die. The ticking of the clock was a false alarm. It may come again, and it may not. In some cases, the sound has not preceded death or disaster. But whatever may come to pass, I am not afraid any more. Do you understand that? I am not afraid!" As she finished speaking, her black eyes were upon the portrait of the girl over the fireplace.

Gene knew then that this was Harriet Van Allen as she had been many years ago, a young girl, beautifully dressed, but gripped by the nameless dread of the unseen clock. "All these years!" Gene murmured.

She heard a sob break from Zella Dodds. "Please, Mrs. Van Allen!" she pleaded.

They Had Gathered in the Front Parlor

Harriet Van Allen's eyes moved slowly from the portrait. She looked calmly, pityingly upon the bowed golden head.

"I wish you would leave as soon as possible," she said.

"You mean — ?" The green eyes came to life with hope.

"Yes," Harriet Van Allen nodded, "that is what I mean."

"Oh!" Zella Dodds cried. "You're a good woman, a great woman."

Harriet Van Allen grunted. "I'm not so sure about that," she said, then added, as Zella Dodds, like a whipped animal, made for the hallway door, "Wait a moment!"

Startled, and again afraid, the woman paused. Harriet Van Allen went to the fireplace and with loving fingers lifted down the little white statute. "This was my mother's," she said. "One of the things that was never in my husband's original collection." A sigh came from her lips. "I never dared to so much as touch it. Mother prized it highly."

"No wonder," Zella Dodds breathed.

"Here," Harriet Van Allen held it out to her. "I want you to have it."

With trembling fingers, too astounded for speech, Zella accepted the Greek head.

"A memento of what you did well, Mrs. Dodds, in releasing me from my fear."

"Oh!" Zella said, and with the precious treasure in both her hands, she fled from the room.

After her exit, with the sound of her retreating footsteps going down the hallway, there fell upon the first parlor another silence. It was Harriet Van Allen who presently broke it.

"Hum!" she said briskly. "I must say I had intended you to see this room under other conditions, Gene." She sighed. "But, now you've seen it."

Gene nodded. "Yes."

They all had so many things to say, so many questions to ask, but they waited for Harriet Van Allen to take the lead. She went again to the fireplace mantel and this time brought down an oval-shaped copper box. It was a little thing, about five inches long. It opened in the old lady's hands, like a large egg sliced through the middle. She looked at it a moment, closed it, and handed it to Gene.

"Look at that, my dear," she said.

Gene held the box and studied its upper surface. An ocean scene was etched there. A ship in full sail was crossing from one shore to another, where stood strange trees, something like pine trees. At the top there was a legend inscribed beautifully. *A span is all* — and at the bottom, *that we can boast.*

Gene said the words aloud, thoughtfully, "A span is all that we can boast." She looked up into Mrs. Van Allen's intent black eyes.

"It says a great deal, Gene. Keep that, and remem-

ber what you did for me, for all of us."

"Oh, you darling!" Tears misted Gene's eyes as she tenderly hugged the old lady.

A hesitant knocking sounded upon the hall door, and it opened to show Emma standing there, both hands under the folds of her white apron. She said, "Excuse me, Missus, but I got some fine apples at the market and I was waiting to know if you would want apple pie or plain sauce."

Harriet Van Allen brushed at her cheek with one hand. She grunted and said gruffly, "How long were you standing there in the hallway, Emma?"

"Why, Missus, I just came up here, after the Dodds lady went tearing out through the kitchen."

Harriet Van Allen frowned. "I mean, while she was in here with Gene. Weren't you out there in the hall, then?"

"Why — " Emma began, but her blue eyes failed under the black, beady gaze. "Yes, I was, Missus," she admitted. "I heard most of what went on."

"Then why are you pretending to be so glum?" Harriet Van Allen demanded. "Don't you realize that we've been — emancipated?"

Emma clasped her hands before her. "Oh, yes, Missus, I know. It's wonderful, isn't it?"

"It is. Make it apple pie. Two, if you can manage it. The children are staying for dinner."

Barbara said, "But Aunt Harriet, that's hours away."

"Fine. You're staying hours."

It was then that James Ainslee threw back his head and laughed. It was a contagious thing, and soon they were all laughing.

Gene said, "It's a pretty nice old world, isn't it?" She turned to Jimmy. "Honestly, now that I think about it, I never saw a finer performance. You were wonderful."

Barbara still clung to Gene. "And you, Gene! You told me you'd slept so well!"

"I did," Gene said. "Like a log."

"In the morning," Barbara corrected. "Why, you must have been up all night to be watching there in the guest house. And you went back and found that clock? I just don't see — "

Gene shook her head. "I told a lot of fibs, Barby. I had to. I was only guessing about the clock. I figured she wouldn't try any more scaring, because she thought she had done what she wanted, so she would leave the clock there."

Barbara sighed. "You'll have to tell me all about it."

"Later," Harriet Van Allen said. "Now, while I think of it, there's something I want to tell you two." She indicated Jimmy and Barbara.

Jimmy said, "Yes, Aunt?"

"About that house of yours. I understood you to say it wasn't completed."

"That's right." Barbara nodded. "That's why

we're staying with Mother Ainslee."

"Humh!" the old lady grunted. "You should have a home of your own."

Jimmy said, "I quite agree with you. We should. But we're making the best of things. We're lucky, the way it is now, to have a spot for our stuff."

Barbara said to him, "But, Jimmy, I thought you were so happy. After all, it's your own home!"

"It used to be," Jimmy corrected. "Now our home's only a hole in the ground. It won't be ready till next spring."

"But I thought — ?" Barbara almost wailed.

"I know. I can't help it, honey. I wish I could be doing the threshold-carrying right now."

"You can," Harriet Van Allen said calmly. "If you don't mind carrying her up a rather stiff flight."

Barbara was puzzled and looked it.

"What do you mean, Aunt Harriet?"

"I mean the guest house." A smile was on her lips. "I'm quite certain it has been vacated by now."

Both Jimmy and Barbara said together, in a Christmas-gift-discovery voice, "Oh, Aunt Harriet!"

"You really mean it?" Barbara took her arm. "Oh, that's wonderful. It's — just too good to be true!"

Jimmy grinned at her. "I thought you said you and mother had reached a new all-time high in getting along?"

"We have," Barbara said. "We did. But — those presents are all getting dusty down there in the

amusement room, and — well — "

"It's all right," Harriet Van Allen interrupted. "I'm sure it's quite clear that you both want a few rooms you can call your own. And the guest house is spick and span, or it should be. Emma was busy over there for the last three days, as soon as we knew our people were coming." She lifted her head a trifle, and raised her voice. "It is in order, isn't it, Emma?"

There was no immediate answer, and Harriet Van Allen said loudly, "Emma — ?"

There was a slight noise in the hall and Emma presently appeared in the doorway. "Yes, Missus?"

"You heard me."

Emma nodded. "Yes, Missus. I swept it out good, even the cellar. But you should get 'em a proper furnace. It gets cold up there in the winter, and there's only the one electric heater."

Jimmy said, "I'll manage the furnace."

His grin went around the room, and Gene felt the flow of happiness that included all her good friends. She had been a silent but eager listener during their conversation, forgetting the doubts and dread that had so recently tormented her. But at the mention of the cellar, which Emma said she had recently swept, remembrance came to Gene.

She knew the stout little housekeeper had spoken the truth. She recalled quite distinctly those marks of a broom over the cellar floor. Without realizing

it, she shuddered.

Jimmy was saying, "It will certainly be handy, Aunt, with the garage right under us." But Barbara had noticed Gene's movement.

She said, suddenly concerned, "What is it, Gene?"

Gene's smile came swiftly. "Oh, nothing." She corrected herself: "Nothing important."

Barbara was not satisfied. She protested, "It is, too, I saw you shiver, Gene. Are you cold?"

"No, of course not. I'm all right." She saw that Emma was bobbing out into the hallway again, and this time she really went back to the kitchen. Gene could hear her padding footsteps. She felt Harriet Van Allen's eyes upon her.

The old lady said, "It would be better to say it and get it over, Gene."

Gene smiled. "I can't fool you, can I?" She looked down at the copper box in her hand and then back to the old lady. "I was just remembering how I came out of that tunnel — into the guest-house cellar."

The beady eyes were regarding her fixedly. Barbara said, "Tunnel, Gene! What tunnel?" She looked from Gene to Harriet Van Allen.

The old lady asked, "How did you get down there, my dear? I thought you told us you frightened Zella with a lot of fibs."

"That was no fib about the tunnel," Gene admitted. "I — I went out the wrong door when I

came down from the cupola."

Harriet Van Allen nodded. "Yes, I remember now. You left the keys."

Barbara looked perplexed. "It's all too much for me!" she said. "I don't know what in the world you're talking about."

The old lady enlightened her. "There is a secret passageway from the cupola down through a tunnel into the guest house. Gene went up to the cupola for me last night, to get something I wanted. You know as much about the rest as I do. She missed the door and came out — over there."

"Oh, Gene!" This was Barbara. "Why, you must have had a nerve-racking time!"

Harriet Van Allen said, "She certainly did."

"I did not!" Gene protested. "I — why, I had a marvelous time. I never felt happier or better in all my life!"

It was true, now. She felt Harriet Van Allen's arm about her waist and heard the old lady saying, "We'll never repay our debt to you, my dear. But you've talked enough for the time being. Let's go into the dining-room. A change of scene might be a good thing!"

She and Gene led the way. Barbara and Jimmy followed.

Jimmy was saying, "Well, it isn't everybody who has a secret tunnel these days, Barby. If we get snowed in this winter, we can always crawl over to

Aunt's house here."

The old lady said over her shoulder, "No, you can't. It's a one-way route. You couldn't even find the door. If you get snowed in, you will have to shovel your way out!"

They were laughing when they seated themselves in the dining-room. The shutters were opened and light streamed in. Through the curtainless windows Gene saw the golden glow that touched the mounds of leaves with magic.

Harriet Van Allen went to her rocking chair before the foremost windows and seated herself. She motioned Gene to a chair beside her. Barbara and Jimmy took the sofa.

The old lady gave a sigh of contentment. "I like these windows," she said.

Gene said, "I don't blame you. I'm going to think of you sitting here, looking out and being—happy."

"Oh." The beady eyes held hers. "You have to go soon?"

"Tonight."

Barbara said, "Oh, Gene, stay till tomorrow."

"Sure," Jimmy put in. "You can help us set up our stuff in our new home." His hand went out. "Well, what I mean is, advise us, and so on."

Gene was looking at the old lady, who had turned her head away and was gazing out at the fallen leaves. Gene thought, *She's so tired. She should go to sleep and not talk any more till dinnertime.*

"I'll help you right now," she said to the two of them. "Can you get some kind of a truck?"

"Some kind!" Jimmy rose swiftly. "I'll get the biggest and best in town. I told 'em at the bank that you needed me here, Aunt, so I have the whole day."

Gene said to Mrs. Van Allen, "Why don't you take a little nap? We'll work up a good appetite and be back in time for dinner."

"I believe I will." Harriet Van Allen said. "Dinner's at six."

Jimmy said, "All right, let's get going. You come on over to the house with us, Gene, and help line up the stuff while I get the truck."

Barbara said, "There's a lot more than you realize, Jimmy. It'll take hours!" She smiled at the old lady. "We did get a great many presents."

Gene went closer to the rocking chair. She said softly in Harriet Van Allen's ear, "I'll be back, and I think I'll stay till tomorrow — if that's all right."

The light that came into the black eyes told Gene better than words how right it would be.

Gene turned to Jimmy and Barbara. "I think I'll stay till tomorrow — " she began. Barbara interrupted her with a cry of delight: "Oh, Gene, I'm so glad!"

Gene smiled at her, and then finished, "Because the first thing in the morning, I have to go downtown and do a little shopping."

Jimmy said, "All right; fine. Now, you come and

give us a hand."

Gene thought, *He's nice — good enough even for Barbara.* It seemed almost unbelievable that this Jimmy and the stern man who had confronted Zella Dodds in the first parlor were one and the same. Jimmy had depth and understanding; he had a fine sense of humor. Gene said to herself, *Oh, I'm glad I came!*

Harriet Van Allen suggested, "Why don't you children go out the front door? I think the outer gate is still open. But if it isn't, I'll attend to it." She stood up.

"That's really something, Aunt," Jimmy told her, "that gate of yours."

Barbara smiled happily. "I like it. It makes us feel so together."

This pleased Harriet Van Allen and she beamed on the girl. "We'll always be together, Barbara." She added, "If you don't get over here for a few minutes every day, you can depend upon Emma nosing over with cookies or jelly."

As they went out the door, and into the warmth of sun and bright blue skies, Jimmy slipped behind them. Barbara said to Gene, "Do you really have to go shopping tomorrow, Gene? I hate to have you wasting time, when your visit is so short."

"I'm staying longer than I'd planned as it is."

"Oh, say you don't have to go!"

They walked on and Barbara said, "You didn't an-

swer me. Do you really have to go shopping tomorrow morning?"

Gene smiled at her. "This is something special. I have to pick out a gift for you."

"A gift for me?" Barbara looked her astonishment. "You gave me a lovely one."

"I want to get you another one — one that will make you remember something for keeps."

Barbara said, "I'll always remember, Gene." A little silence fell. Jimmy remained in the background, absently kicking the leaves. They moved on, coming to the high iron gate.

Barbara said suddenly, "I'll tell you what you can do, though. You can tell me what it was you intended to get. That'll be just as good."

Gene said, "A clock, with a very audible tick."

The look they exchanged was warm with understanding. Barbara whispered, "I've learned something, too, Gene. I'll never be afraid again!"

Gene thought, *I believe it.* The little copper box was warm in her free hand, the other was about Barbara's waist.

At the gate they paused and looked over at the guest house. Jimmy came up to them. "I like it here," he said.

Barbara drew in a deep breath of pure happiness, and Gene said softly, "So do I."

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